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Utopia for music performance graduates. Is it achievable, and how should it be defined?

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For the majority of undergraduate classical music performance students, 'musotopia' is a place where performance ambitions are realised with an international performance career. However, given that so few musicians achieve this ambition, should this ideal be redefined? This paper investigates instrumental musicians' careers by exploring the realities of professional practice. A detailed study which incorporated interviews, focus groups and a lengthy survey, revealed the multiplicity of roles in which most musicians engage in order to sustain their careers. The findings call into question the concept of a musician as a performer, positing that a musician is rather someone who practises within the profession of music in one or more specialist fields. The diversity of roles pursued by practising musicians is not reflected in the majority of conservatorium curricula, thus the enormous potential for the transfer of music graduate skills into the broad cultural industries setting remains largely unrealised. Acceptance of, and preparation for, a more holistic career will enable many more graduates to find their own musotopia.

Background

There is global debate concerning the effectiveness of performance-based education and training in relation to issues such as continued transformation within the cultural sector, the creative and professional needs of practitioners, funding and policy initiatives, and the enhancement of cultural awareness through improved arts advocacy (Create Australia, 2001; Grogan, 1995; Huhtanen, 2004; Metier, 2001a). The International Society for Music Education (ISME) includes a Commission for Education of the Professional Musician, which first met formally in 1974. The initial objective of the Commission included reference to the 'unknown future' facing professional musicians. Since 1986 the Commission has focused on interactions between conservatories and the profession, technological and economic facets of training, the role of music competitions, the musician's role and place in global and changing contexts, reflective practice, course content and objectives. The 1996 summary report stated that 'educational institutions [. . .] should at all times take the responsibility for establishing a process of adjusting educational policies, goals and structures to the world in which future musicians will work' (Aguilar, 1998: 3).

In the USA, the College Music Society (CMS) and the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) gathers extensive annual graduate and student data. The College Music Society reported in 2000–2001 that just over half of music performance graduates were 'gainfully employed' in music making (Campbell, 2001). In that same academic year there

were 317,912 music students in the USA: 2% of the total student population (National Association of Schools of Music, 2001). College Music Society data confirmed that 42% of the music majors at that time were studying music performance. Combining CMS data with NASM figures leads to the conclusion that of the 42% of students majoring in music performance (133,523 students), 48% of graduates ($N = 64{,}091$) were not employed in the performance field. The situation appears to be replicated in the most prestigious schools: at least 27% of the 1994 Juilliard graduates were found to have left music altogether. Sand (2000) described Juilliard graduates as pouring 'out of Juilliard into a very small funnel en route to the classical music stream' (p. 135).

The need to develop a curriculum that encompasses the requirements of the music industry was described by Marcellino and Cunningham (2002) as follows: 'in so many ways, if the tertiary music institutions fail to address current demands of music as it exists outside of the University, then they themselves will fail' (p. 3). Peter Renshaw, former Principal of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama noted that arts training institutions 'are precariously poised between conserving the past and being swamped by the increasing constraints of public accountability' (cited in Lancaster, 2002: 2). Renshaw's (2002) list of eight key questions for music training institutions included graduates' preparedness for diverse careers, wide-ranging artistic practice, collaboration across the cultural industries, accessible professional development and advanced-level training, strategic partnerships, and diversity of courses. In Australia, government reforms since the 1980s have resulted in the amalgamation of conservatories with universities, with the formerly independent conservatories often devolving leadership to the non-discipline leader of a larger humanities faculty.

Despite increased awareness of the challenges facing higher education, Rogers (2002) has suggested that 'significant areas within education, training and employment have yet to address effectively the changing realities of being a musician' (p. 4). McCarthy *et al.* (2001) offer some insight as to why this might be the case: 'it is not entirely clear how to achieve a balance between education and job training within the traditional educational environment' (p. 45). The president of the College Music Society in the USA suggested that 'colleges, universities, and conservatories must deal with the real world of musical experience, not withdraw from it into ivy [sic] towers' (Seaton, 1997: 4). The real world of musical experience, however, has proven to be a little known-entity – reflected in a lack of research that has been acknowledged internationally (Bennett, 2003; Mills, 2003; Rogers, 2004).

In fact, conservatories have changed considerably in response to both internal and external influences (Caird, 2002). As recently as the 1960s, diplomas in music focused primarily on performance in western classical music, baccalaureate degrees were comparatively rare and formal postgraduate study was still less common. As conservatories reacted to change and as many amalgamated with universities, curricula broadened to include subjects such as composition, pedagogy, musicology, jazz, contemporary and world music (Pascoe, 1996; Schippers, 2004), and the academic study of music became still more prominent in the latter half of the 20th century with the advent of state-funded university education. At the same time, competition between conservatories led to the development of specialist courses in areas such as early music and ethnomusicology.

The link between industry practice and the education of artists has been summarised as follows: 'success as a professional artist in Australia involves at least the same suite of skills expected of any person who chooses to set up a small business' (Costantoura, 2000: 65). Principals of the seven music conservatories in the UK, all of which specialise in classical music performance, agreed on a range of initiatives to broaden the education of musicians. The results of these initiatives can be seen in projects such as that run by the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM) within the Research Centre for the Vocational Training of Musicians; Guildhall's CONNECT programme (which won the Queen's Anniversary Prize for Higher and Further Education in 2005); and the 'Working in Music' project at the Royal College of Music in which over 1,000 alumni have been interviewed with respect to their careers. Similar fieldwork initiatives can be found at numerous institutions in the form of placements for conductors and performers, internships, and business roles.

The need for business skills has been recognised internationally, and several conservatorium projects have attempted to increase the level of business skills for musicians: for example, the 'Musikkiyrittäjyyden Kebittämisbanke' (MUSKE) project in Sweden, founded by the continuing education centre at the Sibelius Academy to develop entrepreneurship in music business (Suntola, 2002).

Ian Horsbrugh, former Principal of Guildhall School of Music and Drama, advocated an innovative community music programme that developed communication, teaching and group management skills. In 1990, Guildhall introduced a compulsory teaching module for performance students, and a community development project followed in 1995. Guildhall later attracted funding from the National Foundation for Youth Music to take music into low socio-economic suburbs in East London. Gregory (2002) described the activities as enabling Guildhall to 'redefine its role in the community without compromising its reputation for excellence' (p. 3). However, in the same year he described the performance and communication skills of trained musicians outside of the concert hall as 'second rate' (ibid: 2). The eclectic philosophy demonstrated by these initiatives is typical of the move towards a more multi-faceted curriculum, and yet Rogers (2002) notes that only a small proportion of conservatorium students are exposed to these broader course options.

The National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) was created in the USA in 1924, and with more than 550 member schools it is the agency responsible for the accreditation of music curricula in the USA. It described the competencies, standards, guidelines and recommendations for Bachelor of Music degrees as emphasising 'development of the skills, concepts, and sensitivities essential to the professional life of the musician' (cited in Poklemba, 1995: 7). There has previously been no formal identification of those essential skills, concepts and sensitivities; consequently the task of designing and maintaining vocationally relevant curricula has been unenviable. The study reported here sought to identify some of these essential aspects through an increased understanding of the working practices of musicians.

Method

This paper discusses results from a detailed study conducted between 2002 and 2005. The study sought to create a longitudinal picture of the careers of musicians, and as

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such the demographic was intended to provide representation along the breadth of a career in terms of experience and age, and the inclusion of part-time and full-time practitioners. The research approach combined the interpretive and normative paradigms in an integrative way, using different methods for different aspects of the study to provide increased opportunities for analysis and, as a result, a richer detail of data. The study utilised three distinct, but interrelated data collections within three sequential research phases. Identification of the key concepts led to a pilot study in which 33 interviews were conducted in Australia and Europe. Participants included artists, representatives from funding and professional organisations, and educators who were involved in a process of curricular renewal. Interviews were semi-structured and included questions about education and training, and the practice of musicians and other artists. The data from these interviews informed the development and implementation of a survey, which was trialled with three musicians whose feedback was integrated into the final instrument.

The survey consisted of 24 questions divided into three sections. Section one comprised demographics questions. The second section addressed working patterns, and questions in the third section related to education and training. A subsequent set of interviews conducted with musicians and educators living in Australia, the USA and Europe facilitated initial discussion of the survey data, and provided the basis for two in-depth focus group interviews within which significant themes were further explored. Study participants ($N = 207$ in total) were located through performance and education-related institutions, professional associations and peer networks. The author studied music performance in England prior to working as an orchestral and freelance musician in both England and Australia. The professional and informal networks developed in both countries were fundamental in communicating the survey to musicians and educators. This 'snowball' sampling (Patton, 1990) was also effective in reaching a wide range of musicians who may not otherwise have been located due to a lessening requirement for musicians to hold certain professional memberships. Approximately 80% of study participants were living in Australia at the time of the study; however they offered a global perspective: for example 62% of the orchestral musicians who responded to the survey had come from outside Australia, mostly from Europe; and of the 13 musicians who participated in the focus group interviews, three were from Australia and ten had studied and/or worked extensively overseas.

For the purpose of this study, and taking into account the composite nature of musicians' careers, the term *musician* referred to an individual directly or indirectly involved in the performance of music. This included performers, instructors, directors, composers and those whose supporting role is integral to the performance itself. The anonymity of a questionnaire 'encourages greater honesty' (Cohen *et al.*, 2001: 128), and it was hoped that the use of open questions with ample space and encouragement for comment would lead to a rich source of data. This in fact proved to be the case with many respondents using the available space to expand upon their responses. Analysis incorporated the use of a database within SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences: Version 11.5, 1997), colour coding of qualitative data, and quasi-quantification of some questions to summarise qualitative material. In this paper, survey respondents are identified with the letter (R), interview participants are identified with the letter (I) and focus group participants with the letter (FG).

Findings and discussion

Emerging issues

Work patterns. The study found most musicians to be wholly or partly self-employed, and to work in a variety of often interdependent roles throughout their careers. Musicians who participated in the study held an average of more than two music industry roles, and over one-third of survey respondents held roles outside of the industry. Musicians typically engaged in composite careers, which were found to be normal practice both for freelance musicians and for musicians employed in full-time performance roles: 'I don't know any musicians who only do one thing. Over time, most create and develop varied interesting threads as they build a career' (I). The findings are strengthened by the UK findings that 77% of musicians earn over half of their income from teaching, and that almost 90% hold a secondary occupation (Metier, 2001b). Performance was a secondary role for over half of the UK respondents, indicating that many musicians combine teaching and performance activities within their careers. The findings also reflect a Danish study of contemporary musicians, which found only 6% of music graduates working solely in performance, and 50% of graduates working in a combination of teaching and performance (Traasdahl, 1996).

Time allocation. Of the 40.1% of musicians who were paid for all of their work, 41.9% ($N = 26$) cited performance as their primary role, 51.6% ($N = 32$) were primarily instrumental teachers and the remaining 6.5% ($N = 4$) were primarily administrators. Over 81% of respondents taught music. As shown in Fig. 1, data suggested differences in the primary roles of male and female musicians, with female musicians more likely to have a primarily teaching role, and male musicians more likely to work primarily in performance.

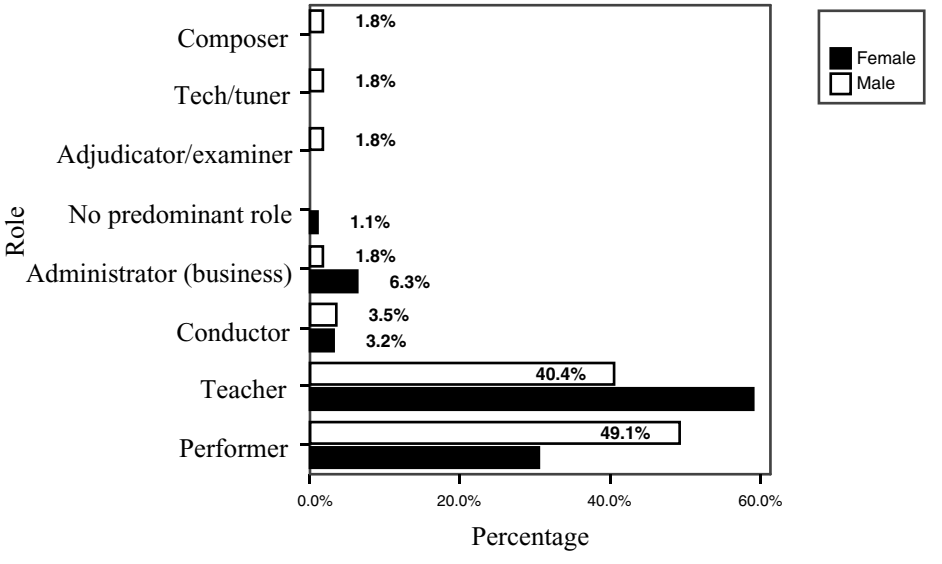

Fig. 1 Average percentage of working time spent in each industry role

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A significant finding was that most musicians spend more time teaching than performing – raising crucial questions about the relevance of existing curricular structures. Performance was the second most common activity for musicians, few of whom worked exclusively in performance roles. Few musicians were found to engage solely with classical music: rather, musicians tended to be musically multi-lingual.

Formal education and training was undertaken by 94.1% ($N = 143$) of respondents at an average of 1.4 different study locations. Graduate or postgraduate study was undertaken by 39.8% of respondents. The most common course of study was a Bachelor of Music or its overseas equivalents, which was undertaken by 61.5% of respondents. Using a Likert scale from Ineffective (1) to Highly effective (10), respondents rated the effectiveness of their formal education and training in terms of their careers. Respondents who had undertaken graduate or post-graduate level education and training gave a mean rating of 8, and those who had undertaken undergraduate level education gave a ranking of 7. Almost 70% of respondents had engaged in informal education and training.

Respondents were asked what changes they would make to their formal education and training. Responses embraced numerous themes, the three most common curriculum areas being the inclusion of: (1) career education and industry experience (19.9%); (2) instrumental pedagogy (17.6%); and (3) business skills (15.3%). Career education and industry experience were also major interview themes. In particular, participants stressed that students should be made aware of the potential for them to achieve their goals, and should plan and study accordingly.

Significantly, performance, pedagogy and business skills arose as: (1) the curriculum areas for which educational change was most often recommended; (2) the skills most used by participants; and (3) the most commonly pursued informal education and training. Interviewees suggested that an effective curriculum should include as core components communication skills, pedagogy, psychology of performance, business skills, language (particularly for conductors), and physical fitness. Experience within the profession (such as that offered within some conservatorium programmes) was viewed as an important way for student musicians to learn the potential for engagement in a variety of roles, and to understand the skills that they would need to take advantage of available opportunities.

Musicians who participated in the study had undertaken performance-based training at either a conservatorium or university. Entry requirements for undergraduate performance degrees were criticised by participants as being both too restricting in their performance focus and too low in terms of performance standard: 'to achieve the [student] quota, the criteria have to be lowered, which undervalues the value of the course' (I). Participants suggested that students should be directed to take realistic streams of study at the commencement of their programmes. Participants also suggested that undergraduate degrees need to be longer in order to equip graduates effectively for the profession: 'make courses longer, or don't expect to fit it all in' (I). This is unlikely to be a popular option given the cost of performance degrees. The more likely solution is to make the existing resources go further.

Given that standards vary each year according to applicants, it is more crucial now than perhaps ever before to consider the future of graduates: how many of the entrants to performance-based courses are likely to achieve a standard at which they can successfully attain one of the very few performance jobs available, and should there be a broader

curriculum with realistic degree and career planning for all students reflective of their potential?

Discussion

Data strongly indicated that far from making a living by making music, the majority of musicians finance music making by making a living. Commonplace definitions of a musician as 'someone who performs' are not supported by participants in this study. Rather, participants believe that musicians practice within the profession of music. To offer a comparison, the profession of geology includes geologists who specialise in areas such as exploration, mining or resource definition. No one would suggest that the sole role of a geologist is to look at rocks; neither is the sole role of musicians to perform music.

A musician typically practises within the profession in one or more specialist fields such as performance, teaching, composition and artistic direction; and in common with other business people, musicians sustain their practice by recognising and meeting the needs of the communities in which they work. In addition to performance skills, musicians require the skills to run a small business, the confidence to create new opportunities, pedagogical and communication skills for use in educational, ensemble and community settings, industry knowledge and strong professional networks.

Globalisation has had a profound influence on the level of interaction between the music industry and the wider cultural sphere. The involvement of musicians in a plethora of musical genres and cultures leads to the conclusion that musicians need to be conversant in multiple musical genres. The study confirmed that musicians require understanding of their diverse cultures and communities in order to provide services relevant to community need. To achieve this, conservatories need to be an integral part of the communities in which they operate, and in which students will one day work. Involvement of this kind is essential to the societal relevance of musicians, and education will to a large extent determine whether this exposure will provide a wealth of new possibilities, or feelings of isolation and uncertainty.

The inclusion of a wide range of skills in conservatorium curricula would enable music graduates to expand the scope of their performance and non-performance roles. It is common for musicians to supplement their income with low paid, unskilled or unrelated work as available, and yet the wide range of activities within the cultural industries highlights the potential for suitably skilled musicians to diversify their roles in line with family and other commitments. A broad base of skills would increase opportunities for musicians to access skilled secondary or alternative positions with higher financial rewards and, possibly, more personal satisfaction.

The effectiveness of training and education for any profession is determined by the extent to which the profession is understood by educators and curriculum designers. A significant finding was that musicians spend the highest average proportion of time engaged in teaching, performance, business, and ensemble direction. This is not reflective of the allocation of time within most Bachelor of Music degrees. The most common reason given by respondents for non-completion of study was an early transition to work, which is logical given that a performance degree is not required for performance positions. Data revealed the need for performance degrees to incorporate an accredited teaching qualification (or at

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least components of one) that is recognised by the professional bodies with which graduates will work: 'all musicians will have to teach at some time' (R); 'there isn't so much a shortage of instrumental music teachers as a shortage of qualified ones' (I).

Participants accepted that musicians could not possibly graduate with all of the skills required for their future career; however an understanding of the cultural industries would inform musicians' selection of continuing professional development opportunities based upon the knowledge and skills required for their professional practice: 'awareness that business/management skills will very possibly be necessary in a music career – not necessarily to supply those skills, but to make students aware of the resources and education available' (R). Responsibility for conveying the realities of musicians' practice rests not only with the tertiary sector, but also with those whose involvement at the earliest stages of musical development provides the catalyst from which musical aspirations grow. Study participants bemoaned courses not designed for the 'real world' (R), which resulted in a lack of career preparation characterised by insufficient industry experience, deficient skills in business practices, and inadequate awareness of the music profession. Graduates' lack of preparedness arose throughout the study: 'when I sub-contract a 23-year-old musician for a gig who has just graduated from a music degree and doesn't even know what an invoice is let alone how to write one, I know there is something definitely wrong' (R); 'it's so important to train people with the attitude of entrepreneurs right from the word go' (I).

The findings of this study create a strong case for musicians to recognise as early as possible the potential for success in a broad variety of professions, and bring to the fore the notion that career preparation and industry awareness should be contained within the performance degree; adding vocational considerations to artistic ones. A degree of reluctance can be expected from undergraduate performance majors who are asked to expend valuable time acquiring the broader skills needed to sustain a career in music, especially when their intended career is entirely in performance, and students often do not understand the relevance of non-performance skills. The development of positive attitudes towards non-performance study requires students to recognise their individual talents and interests as being personal strengths, and to develop them into realistic and achievable goals. It also requires conservatories to provide a realistic view of the profession, and to advocate and model a positive interaction with non-performance roles. It is proposed that recognition of those strengths would most effectively be realised through experiential learning and contact with the profession. Intending performers should be apprised of their skills and talents upon entry to a course, and regularly thereafter. An important finding was the impact of rapid cultural industry change on arts practitioners. To offer appropriate guidance to students, school of music staff need to be kept abreast of cultural industry knowledge and to maintain professional contact with the profession.

The study exposed vast potential for commercial and active research activities that would increase the liaison between community and conservatorium in addition to making conservatories more financially independent. As the cultural industries will continue to change, artists need to sustain their careers by maintaining the currency of their skills and knowledge. Musicians have continually to foster and develop their personal strengths and attributes to feel secure in their abilities, and to accept that ability is an evolving suite of skills which develops as a positive result of both successes and failures. A lack of continuing

professional development (CPD) opportunities for artists places conservatories in an ideal position to offer lifelong learning rather than only initial training. Significant CPD needs for artists were identified by the study to include a range of applicable skills such as business (incorporating elements such as marketing, communication skills and ICT), conducting, pedagogy and new technologies. Time and money were the two most commonly cited barriers to those wishing to undertake CPD, which has to be flexible, and mindful of the hours in which musicians are most likely to be engaged in work.

Research provides an additional and important source of funding, and the lack of recognition for creative research output remains a crucial problem for many conservatories; however the output of academic research would be improved by appropriately updating the skills of staff. Training student musicians without the necessary skills to direct research and commercial ventures is self-defeating when musicians are the most likely candidates to take future positions as conservatorium staff.

Concluding comments

Performance-based education and training in classical music does not provide graduates with the requisite skills to achieve a sustainable career. This study proposes two solutions to the problem of insufficient positions for performance graduates. The first is to have fewer graduates, and consequently fewer conservatories. The second, and by far the preferred solution, is for conservatories to accept and to advocate a broader definition of the term *musician* reflective of the profession, and to instigate a process of curricular change conversant with those realities. Students need to be encouraged to see the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of pursuing a composite career incorporating a variety of roles and interests.

Of particular importance to the proficient delivery of music curricula is the effectiveness of learning transfer through investigative and reflective practices, and the establishment of productive learning environments. Curricular reform could learn from the incorporation of individual learning accounts and action learning strategies such as those piloted by Metier (2001a) in the UK; flexibly delivered professional development programmes; the extensive use of industry mentors; and both online and offline support networks incorporating technological and small business assistance. Recognising obvious (and at times overwhelming) budgetary constraints, two possibilities are raised for further debate. The first is to adopt a learning organisation model such as that posited by Choo (2001), within which the evaluation and refinement of curricula are ongoing and intrinsically linked to the outside environment; forming a community of practice with the profession itself. The second is to consider the collaborative delivery of programmes across art forms. Performance-based music degrees tend to be designed around highly specialised skills in much the same way that most creative degrees are structured. Musicians in the study noted numerous 'generic' skills that are 'common to all aspects' (FG) of the profession. It is possible to turn the existing degree structure inside out – placing a core of generic skills at the centre of a collaborative delivery model, and freeing resources for specialist streams appropriate to the needs of each individual student. Is this a utopian view in itself? The model does not detract from the concept of an 'elite' standard of professional practice; in

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fact it enhances the effectiveness of the conservatorium model as it maximises the potential for individuals to find their niche within the music profession.

During their initial training and practice, participants reflected that they had self-defined according to their instrumental speciality: for example, as a *pianist*. Self-definition as a *musician* arose once they had added additional roles to their professional practice. The intake into conservatories needs to consider the potential for candidates to achieve success as a musician rather than as a performer. On this basis the selection criteria applied by conservatories would include skills and attributes demonstrable by a wide range of students, and the potential for success (being the achievement of a sustainable career) would be much enhanced for each individual.

Most performance students aspire to a performance career. Exposing them to the environment in which they will someday work serves not only to demonstrate the required performance standard – it serves also to highlight many other possibilities for employment. The rate of employment would improve, and less reliance on performance skills alone would increase recruitment into music degree programmes from a broader socio-economic base. The un-met demand for CPD offers an enormous opportunity for conservatories to work with the musicians in their local communities through the provision of lifelong learning as a core commercial activity, and these broader programmes would be very attractive to practising musicians. The community of practice would provide the expertise, experience and industry knowledge to deliver many of the CPD programmes.

It would seem that the practising musician pursues a diversity of roles not considered by the majority of conservatories; thus there is enormous, largely unrealised potential for the transfer of music graduate skills into the broad cultural industries setting. Musotopia is not a performance career: musotopia is the ability to sustain one's professional practice within a framework that meets one's personal, professional and artistic needs. Acceptance of, and preparation for a more holistic career will enable many more graduates to find their own musotopia.

Note

The study from which this paper is derived is titled *Classical Instrumental Musicians: Educating for Sustainable Professional Practice*. It can be accessed at the following URL: http://theses.library.uwa.edu.au/adt-WU2006.0002/

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