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Beyond a Doctorate of Musical Arts: Experiences of its impacts on professional life

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There is much dialogue in the academy about the role of doctoral studies in relation to employment, career trajectories and graduate outcomes. This project explores the experiences of Doctor of Musical Arts (DMA) graduates and students at the Queensland Conservatorium in Australia to reveal how the programme has impacted upon their professional activities, while also addressing assumptions promulgated through the literature on artistic practice and research education. The paper presents emergent themes and concludes by offering insights into artistic research in music more broadly.

Introduction

A Doctor of Musical Arts (DMA) was first introduced at our conservatoire in 2005 with a view to providing relevant practice-based doctoral research training for Australian musicians. This was not based on any northern hemisphere model, but rather, sought to reflect the cultural workings and professional destinations of the local sector. Following earlier analyses and adjustments (Hannan, 2008; Harrison & Emmerson, 2009; Schippers, 2007), the University graduated its first DMA in 2009, then followed by regular numbers from 2011. In a corresponding study we therefore examined the experiences of these doctoral candidates (Draper & Harrison, 2011) to offer conclusions about the intrinsic nature of artistic processes, methodologies and products (pp. 97–98) and to draw implications for refinement of the degree program structure accordingly (p. 99). In the article's closing remarks however, we went a little further than the context of the higher education environment to offer:

> . . . that creative and performing artists will increasingly colonize, then dominate their own research space . . . to progress and redefine musical practice . . . less informed by orthodox academic assumptions but more so by authentic practice-led knowledge work. (p. 100)

By way of follow-up to that article, we believe it timely to now examine its closing assertion more fully – in what ways does the DMA contribute to a musician's skill base given that earlier research has established that the majority of candidates already possess significant track records as mature age students? We are also interested in assumptions that doctoral qualifications may only benefit university employment prospects and/or applied commercial research (cf. Diamond et al., 2014). It may well be that institutionalised employment is part of a wider continuum of practice; however, our central enquiry

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relates to 'does the DMA make a difference to the musician, their music practices and products'(Australian Government, 2013; Bennett, 2012).

Methodology

The primary research instrument was designed as a discussion paper and integrated questionnaire to interrogate the above themes, and was then distributed to a sample DMA population for response. Interviewees comprised four graduates (G1–G4) and four candidates (C1–C4) to present a distribution of gender and specialisations including classical music, composition, education, jazz, popular music and voice. Six live in Brisbane or Melbourne, with one now based at a Malaysian university, and another with dual US-Australian residency. As for many Australian musicians, all travel extensively as part of their professional practice and research endeavours.

The discussion paper utilised various literature concerning artistic research propositions (cf. Borgdorff, 2010) and related scholarship about the nature of music processes and outcomes. This incorporated data and commentary on graduate destinations, the doctorate, and the nature of portfolio careers and professional practice (cf. Association of European Conservatoires, 2015; Crispin, 2015; Duffy & Broad, 2015).

In what follows, this article presents the exact sequencing of the discussion paper as presented to the participants, now indicated by themes as section headings and questions as sub-headings. This is interwoven with the literature, together with an arrangement of emergent findings via phenomenographic method (Marton, 1986), which was circulated back to participants for verification and/or clarification as required. The paper concludes by offering broader insights into artistic research in music.

Doing a DMA

To begin, we extend our earlier study (Draper & Harrison, 2011) to explore why a professional musician would undertake a DMA. From a fine arts perspective, Barbara Bolt offers:

> . . . someone who has been out of an art school for a long time, has developed a mature practice yet has found an emerging desire to frame it within the parameters of a specific research enquiry, often in order to challenge their practice and deepen it in ways beyond what may be possible within a more conventional gallery-based career. (cited in Knezic, 2013, para. 11)

We turned to our participants and asked for their response to this statement.

Why did you commence doctoral studies?

All musicians broadly agreed with Bolt's ideas, their thoughts including:

> I was looking for fresh ideas and a new inspiration and drive to further develop my concepts. I also felt a need to formalise and document my practices and theories so the doctoral studies seemed like the perfect answer to all of these needs. (G1)

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> . . . as a freelance musician . . . I am always fitting in with a new section /ensemble/ leader . . . I applied to do my DMA because I wanted to start a project that was entirely directed by me and centred on the skills I wanted to develop – both artistically and intellectual. (C3)

We wondered how these aspirations might have measured up in practice. We therefore asked about what may it be like for those either now well entrenched in completing the degree, or as graduates in the field as doctors of musical arts.

Have your views changed over time? If so, why?

Answers were mixed. Many indicated 'not really' (G2, C1) or 'no' (G1, G4), while others aligned the DMA trajectory with the on-going developmental processes occurring in their professional settings, for example:

> Considering notions of identity in my choices/bias. Becoming more passionate about certain genres or aspects within Australian music relating to my own instrument. (C2)

> In practice – experientially; in research – enormously, due to international opportunities that have presented themselves and connections that have been forged to superb levels of artistic thinking . . . New revelations of what, why, how on a daily basis. (G3)

Overall it seemed that the primary driver was in terms of deepening an individual musical identity but less so in terms of gaining academic employment. To understand this a little better, we turned to examine perspectives on the idea of careers and music-making as a profession.

Destinations and portfolios

If one were to Google the term 'career destinations in music', first results read as formulated by university marketing departments or popular press. Elsewhere, many reports ignore the creative arts entirely to cite statistics on industry employability within the globalisation of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) clusters.

> One in five employers said that doctoral graduates were business critical – without them their business could not function. This was particularly the case in the research and development and manufacturing and engineering sectors and in businesses that are built on science and technology. (Diamond et al., 2014, p. 4)

Nonetheless, a questioning of the idea of 'the music profession' finds traction in some literature. In Scotland, Celia Duffy and Stephen Broad situate this via an industrial metaphor:

> . . . the relationship with the music profession is particularly interesting because there is very little sense of a divide between it and the conservatoire. The traditional relationship could be characterised as trading services: the conservatories supply 'raw material' for the professional, members of the profession teach in the conservatoire and mould that material. (2015, p. 38)

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These views may be applicable in terms of (say) chamber music activity in the UK or Europe, but other contexts are worth scrutiny. In the case of Australia, there are matters of distance, culture, politics and funding opportunities to consider in terms of operational awareness and /or mapping exercises (Australia Council For The Arts, 2015; Bartleet et al., 2013). Dawn Bennett writes:

> Answers are not found in statistical collections, nor . . . revealed by graduate destination data. [these] exercises measure 'main occupation' and are geared towards the mono employment model that is less and less common . . . the only people who can provide valid, empirical data about what it is to be a musician are musicians themselves. (2012, para. 2)

We took some related questions to our study group.

> *What does the idea of 'career destination' mean to you?*
>
> A career is not a destination, although may have points of longish visitation . . . my experience . . . taught me that if you think you have arrived, you are in for a surprise. The destination is very much a continent rather than a city. (G4)
>
> I've always refused to answer 'where do you see yourself?' type questions because such a teleological approach is of little interest to me. I'm far more interested in the discoveries of how things unfold. (C1)

A well-developed capacity to 'think on one's feet' is an attributes implicit in these views. Conversely, 'readiness for the profession' is a buzz-phrase in common parlance in the tertiary sector and like Duffy & Broad's enquiry (2015) we explored this notion further:

> *What do the terms music 'profession' and music 'industry' mean to you?*
>
> *Profession* means having the craft of music making maintained at a high level of proficiency. The term *industry* is problematic and in the current climate is something of a misnomer. (G2)
>
> *Profession* . . . implies broad and specialist knowledge applied in recognized forum. *Industry . . .* not necessarily arts based; usually commercially based. (G3)
>
> I would take *profession* to be a field in which people are focused on music being their primary source of income and endeavour . . . *industry* . . . a much broader term, relating not just to music makers and educators but also to a whole gamut of [other] professionals. (C3) (italics ours)

Thus there is a distinction between the two concepts. On the one hand, the idea of 'the profession' is linked to personal operating conditions, while 'industry' is something that represents a patchwork of (at best) supportive or (at worst) opportunistic endeavours by arts-related workers. In one sense, the profession comprises the individual, her networks and rhizomatic access points. Participants identified as having careers comprising multiple profiles such as artistic director, composer, educator and performer. They engaged a given

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persona within a range of work contexts, some of which were held sequentially, others simultaneously.

We asked about how they managed these complex settings. Some cited the use of the Internet as an important adjunct, including for the distribution of creative products (G1 & G3), artistic communication and teaching (G1 & C3), or in terms of work-flow and scheduling (C4). However, it was in response to the following question that many different perspectives arose.

What factors influence your ability to create sustainable work practices?

> My work is all about supply and demand. With teaching I need to inspire students, and with performances I need to blow audiences away. This means time on my instrument to keep skills at a high level. (G1)

> The politics around arts funding effect every level of the ecology within which I operate. (G2)

> My work is often in unpaid experimental fields. If I waited for grants to undertake projects I wouldn't get any art done. I do undertake performing work from time to time that pays quite well – but these encounters are sporadic and unpredictable. (C1)

> . . . my ability to network and encourage open dialogue with colleagues new and old, remain visible . . . being informed about activities and opportunities . . . access to mentors, create opportunities for my practice to be seen, and open to new modes of practice that may be outside my comfort zone. (C2)

> With a portfolio career the biggest challenges to sustainable work practices are related to time management. This includes time for rest as it does time for the variety of work. Being quite experienced in most facets of my work there isn't a great need for development of new ideas outside each work environment, meaning development happens on the job. (C4)

From of the variety of settings which are highlighted here, it would seem that it is a collection of highly individual but agile portfolios that make up the music profession in Australia. From this perspective, the idea of contemporary 'up-skilling' for adult professional musicians comes into sharper focus. We therefore now return to examine our DMA in terms of artistic research training, its intentions, approaches and impacts on these professional lives.

Artistic research training in music

> In wonderful polarity, music can be said to be sound without meaning, sign to be meaning without sound . . . What if we could have music in sign? . . . if a pianist's hands did meaningful things other than playing the piano, or even making sound? (Polansky, 2014, p. 183)

The concept of practice-based research in the arts arose following revised relationships between vocational institutions and universities (Draper & Cunio, 2013). Initially there

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Table 1. *Anatomy of a DMA confirmation paper, c. 5–7,000 words*

Page one	Lit. Review	Methods	Structure	Timelines	Progress
WHY Abstract Introduction Overarching research aim	WHERE Project contribution to the field Underpinning theory, gaps in the literature Specific sub-questions/ aims	HOW A recipe for how the project will be done Research methods references Ethics Analysis approach	Chapter outline Creative portfolio outline **Conclusion** Review and summary	Key dates and targets Proposed items **References** APA 6th Discography /videography if required	Work to date Early thoughts Reference to appendices **Appendices** As applicable: Case studies Recordings Scores, etc.

was a trend to mimetic isomorphism – that is, where the subsumed entity imitates the parent given that the former's goals may not be entirely clear, or via *coercive* isomorphism when the lesser organisation is compelled to adopt certain thinking (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). A third category exists as *normative* isomorphism, where professional networks influence change and this is where the heart of our enquiry resides. There have been related developments around the concept of 'artistic research', its modes and methods. Henk Borgdorff defines this as:

> . . . to denote that domain of research and development in which the practice of art – that is, the making and the playing, the creation and the performance, and the works of art that result – play a constitutive role in a methodological sense. (2010, p. 21)

To date however, much of the discourse has been politically driven and resides within the context of university employment and government research collection exercises. This often uses terminology such as 'equivalence' or 'non-traditional outputs' evidenced as products rather than research *processes.* The moniker 'artistic' may be problematic and equally as jarring as singling out 'library' or 'written' research. Less evident still are the 'native' attributes *behind* the music making and in order to unpack these ideas further, we now return to our DMA structure, then to the views of the musician participants.

It is true that our early DMA research training components borrow from traditional academic models. This scaffolding occurs in the first year of the programme (Table 1, below) prior to the defence of a confirmation paper and is cognisant of the fact that the professional intake has not usually undertaken regular exegetical writing beforehand.

Some years later (often through iterative means) a final DMA exegesis atypically consists of a substantial creative portfolio plus a c. 60,000-word investigation. It is exactly this post-confirmation phase that informs the most and where the authentic processes of artistic research in music are more fully articulated. Darla Crispin elaborates:

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> [artistic research] does not proceed teleologically and faces procedural problems and challenges when read alongside disciplines where there is a deeply embedded assumption that the vector from the formulation of the research question to its resolution should be demonstrably linear and causation fully transparent. (2015, p. 67)

In what ways might the training outcomes work (or not) 'across the whole research spectrum – replicability . . . verifiability, justification of claims by reference to evidence' (Association of European Conservatoires, 2015, p. 3). Do these approaches continue to impact upon our candidates and graduates? We sought their views as follows.

Research 'questions' and 'methods': Have these constructs translated into your professional activities?

> In terms of research methods I have come to see the majority of these as labels or 'constructs' as ways of framing activities I am already pursuing. (C2)

> I think that the questions and methods pertinent to my project were always there – it is just through the research process that they have been made tangible. (C3)

It would seem that 'research thinking' is inherently present in music making, but the DMA framework prompts this to unfold with greater specificity and provides new language(s) via which to communicate insights. We asked about 'research questions' in terms of music:

Does your music answer 'questions'?

> I don't think it does 'answer questions', I think it asks them, and I think it creates spaces for undirected contemplation. (G2)

> My music is exploration – answers may be forthcoming but not required for validity. (G3)

> I don't think the music I usually perform necessarily answers 'questions' .. [by[studying music deeply and looking at it with a specific question in mind, you can find particular answers. (C3)

> The procedures answer questions – and sometimes pose them. I tend to go looking for something to tinker with a proof of concept rather than complete. (G4)

Both here and in other DMA exegeses we find salient meanings for artistic research trajectories: that the process is reflexive as it proceeds; that methods may develop and transform to become part of a project's 'findings'; and the aims often evolve into 'better questions' as part of conclusions. Given these attributes, we followed up by asking about what some pose as core tenants for all research – 'truth' and 'transferable' outcomes.

'Validity' or 'replicability of results': Do these notions hold true in your professional life?

Half of the respondents (mostly graduates) had reservations about this question, either choosing not to answer at all (G1; G3) or simply as 'not really' (G2; C1). Otherwise there

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were a number of opinions associated with these terms in interviewees' everyday musical practice:

> . . . it is easier to invest in a project, if you feel it has validity . . . a very personal concept and can change from person to person. Replicability of results is something that orchestral musicians aim toward . . . hoping to present the best version of a work . . . although I am constantly aiming toward the 'perfect' performance that I have formulated in my mind through research and preparation, ultimately every performance experience is unique. (C3)
>
> I am constantly questioning the validity of my practice and my research. Though I think it is important to not let this line of thinking get too destructive but be constructive in focussing the goals of my research and practice. Replicability of results – only in terms of seeing more access and knowledge . . . within Australia and overseas. (C2)
>
> Validity is more to do with how I feel the work is grounded in intellectual discourse and has a connection to its listeners . . . Composition diaries, reflections on past events, compositional methodologies themselves have all been part of a process of defining key creative principles, transferable between projects. (C4)

For some, aspects of validity have more to do with personal satisfaction than the usual academic connotations of peer review. 'Replicability of results' however was a far more alien construct 'validity yes, replicability not so much' (G4) in time-based processes which continued to be reviewed and adapted by the musician themselves according to setting and audience. Next we wanted to unpack this further in the professional world.

Musical excellence

> Through the consolidation and transformation of practices and concepts [artistic research in music] generates dynamic changes in the broader arts community as well as engaging with other disciplines. Its modes of operation position music research to . . . reflect, respond and shape our changing social environment. (Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre, 2015)

We sought to test the aspirations of the DMA and the role of our conservatoire in society, and in terms of normative isomorphism (as above) to understand how the ecology of doctoral-qualified musicians in the workforce might influence future paradigms. We probed about validity and quality in the field:

'Peer review'. Who are your peers and how do they comment on your work?

> My peers are general musicians and particularly drummers/percussionists. (G1)
>
> My peers are the musicians I play with, the audiences I play for, the critics who write about my music, the board I answer to . . . they comment on my work in various ways. (G2)
>
> . . . other orchestral musicians, with those who play the same instrument as I do, as my primary peer group. We often give each other feedback when we play

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together or when we have opportunities to hear each other play in recital/audition environments. (C3)

A common reference point here was in terms of respected musicians and less in terms of 'external' review (either academic or journalistic). This is something that until recently has not been as well-aligned in the academy as it might be given that dissertations must be examined by those with doctoral qualifications (usually academics). However, with greater numbers of DMA graduates we are now increasingly able to invite their experience as the cycle continues. How might these two worlds align, or not?

Are there any differences you see between the university and the public sector in terms of how the quality of artistic material is judged?

It is wonderful in the university context to have people who will tell you frankly what they think of your work – whose job it is to tell you what they think. This helped me a great deal. The challenge is to find such people in the public sector. (G2)

Thus, the role of the university is appreciated but is further identified as:

. . . in the public sector, work can be two of good, interesting or bankable, very rarely all three . . . there is not a lot of motivation for pushing the envelope. The university sector is essentially a sheltered workshop where artists can experiment and don't lose money doing it . . . it has to happen, or the rest of the world will go no-where, but it's a parallel universe. (G4)

This 'parallel universe' has meaningful implications for the duty of care of a university and its acknowledgement of music making settings as variously described:

An environment that encourages difference and radical thinking, whether or not is it the most popular in a particular setting, is more likely to understand and give informed responses . . . [there is] a stronger acceptance of so-called non-popular musics outside Australia. (G3)

. . . a significant difference in the judgement of artistic material. In the university, artistic material is viewed more holistically . . . In the public sector . . . the listener is more inclined to focus on the playing standard, without taking into account all of the . . . framing. (C3)

. . . the discourse created within and by artistic work is most highly valued. In a professional context, sadly, these things rarely matter. Musical standards of technical finesse, originality, and professionalism are often set far lower at university than in the professional world. (C1)

These points are revealing: while the academy may aspire to diversity and 'blue sky' research, it may also be possible to be rewarded for 'good research about bad art' (cf. Wilson, 2014). This is something we are reminded to keep at the forefront of the DMA: that high level musical track record is just as central to application for entry as it is for

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completed exegeses. It is the balance of the two that remains key in order to satisfy both the academy *and* the profession.

How do you disseminate your music and/or your thinking about it?

DMA musicians' views return to complex portfolios, as typified in the busy response:

> . . . writing music, improvising music, releasing music on CD, vinyl and digital formats, designing musical contexts, by curating programs of music, by talking about music in educational contexts, by talking about music in informal contexts, by advocating for particular approaches to music on committees and panels, by writing about music occasionally. (G2)

The DMAs interface with a multitude of levels of society. They perform, sell music and inspire audiences and they may also become articulate ambassadors for the discipline.

Leadership

> The most gifted artists . . . take the ability to imagine, adapt, empathise and collaborate to another level through training, practice, discipline and courage. The extraordinary achievements that come when the most gifted individuals combine capacity and skill is something we recognise. (Australian Government, 2013, para. 2)

Such emotive statements often arise in reports which refer to the role of creative arts in society. However, common approaches to the substantiation of these claims usually includes creative industries-styled data to cite dollar amounts and contributions to the economy, but far less so in terms of individual achievements. Following earlier studies (Bartleet et al., 2013; Harrison 2011), we wanted to understand more about extramusical outcomes.

For many musicians it would be unusual to argue a philosophical /methodological *raison d'être* for works which are often left to 'speak for themselves'. However we also know that high-level musical practice is the result of much commitment, reflection and decision-making processes (cf. Emmerson, 2007) and so we asked,

In terms of your musical thinking, planning and actions, has your DMA helped?

> I am definitely more articulate in the way I describe and understand my artistic processes and I think this translates into a greater level of self-trust. I trust my instincts and intuition and am less self conscious about describing them. (G2)

> . . . to extend this practice to all of my musical life . . . to develop skills in organisation, writing, speaking in public settings and framing my work with clear parameters and direction. (C3)

For the DMAs then, is it exactly this articulation at work – firstly via the exegesis, but then importantly manifested externally as 'music in sign' (Polansky, 2014, p. 183). More broadly though, we turned to other aspects of professional life:

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Has the DMA experience impacted on your leadership capacities?

> . . . the difference is the discipline of thought. In the [research training] process . . . one learns to work within a structure . . . Leadership roles tend to rely on that ability, even if the structure itself then becomes somewhat malleable. (G4)
>
> . . . more able to articulate my thoughts and motivations in the public sphere. All the writing and refining of one's ideas that happens during the DMA have had strong flow-through effects to my ability to confidently advocate for my ideas and projects. (C1)
>
> I doubt I would be in the position I am now in without it . . . It is crucial as an artistic leader to be articulate, both in written and verbal communication. In this regard I found the process of developing my exegesis extremely valuable, and the challenge of presenting my work in colloquiums etc. also important. (G2)

Here we see the emergence of the concept of advocacy and the confident capacity to argue the points, to improvise and extend one's professional capacities across portfolio networks via text, public speaking and the credibility of the music itself. As a final note however, we must draw attention to teaching and students as a notable feature, clearly so important to many responses throughout this discussion paper. This includes:

> Teaching is important to my artistic leadership . . . I mentor students interested in learning my methods and approaches. (G1)
>
> . . . of most benefit to others in the context of my teaching work. Being connected to different musical organisations allows my students opportunities to meet with and learn from high profile players and experience the music profession from the front line. (C3)
>
> My thinking about music . . . pervades my work in curriculum design. Every now and then I run into an ex-student who tells me I shaped the way they hear, or listen or create. (G4)

Leadership is not only expressed in terms of the navigation of corporate, political and media sectors – it is in the studio work between DMAs-as-teachers and their students where both musical and intellectual knowledge transfer continues to populate the world in turn. Here we are reminded of the unique role of teaching in the arts – not compartmentalised into professional, research or teaching activities – but as a core attribute of what it means to be a musician.

Conclusions

We began by querying our earlier article (Draper & Harrison, 2011) in terms of the progress of DMAs as music professionals and artistic researchers. Primarily, here we have focussed on the voices of our participants in order to draw preliminary conclusions and to focus our next steps for the topic. Since the time of writing, an Australian Research Council (ARC) grant has been awarded to this team and collaborators across the sector to conduct a deeper three year enquiry into the nature of portfolio

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careers for Australian musicians. This includes investigating the impacts of higher degree research training and is partially informed by the findings of this study, as follows.

For this group of DMAs, the qualification was not intended as a route to university employment (and less than 10% of our entire DMA population over time would cite this as a reason). While commencing in a traditional paradigm of early doctoral research structures (see Table 1, above), musicians bend, shape, and evolve their own individual processes and outcomes over time in much the same way that they might improvise and/or adapt their creative works, commissions and performances in their workplaces. Primarily, it is clear they work via multidimensional means and the primary purpose of undertaking research is to deeply explore the self and expand creative repertoire within the organizing framework that the DMA provides.

Much of this would appear to be at odds with prevailing STEM assumptions and here therefore is worth progressing, explaining and citing the potential for what we continue to learn about artistic research, indeed, for what it means to be a creative artist. Research for these musicians means less about products (although 'quality' remains a concern throughout, as does the desire for relevant peer review) – but more about *processes*. 'The making and the playing, the creation and the performance, and the works of art that result – play a constitutive role in a methodological sense' (Borgdorff, 2010, p. 21). Here therefore, methods evolve over time and revised artistic research practices often constitute core 'findings'. Otherwise, these DMAs rejected the idea that 'career destination' might be a sensible term for creative artists, or that 'employer' or 'profession' aligns with the portfolio activities of a musician – and to that end the abovementioned ARC grant will probe these matters further.

In terms of the nature of artistic research outcomes, this differed markedly from traditional STEM imperatives for 'validity' and 'replicability'. Contrary to scientific experiment, analysis and often globalised mass production of research by-products, the primary meaning generated is in terms of artistic insight for that particular musician. This tends to be validated by thick description, a compelling narrative design, and the realisation of creative works via multi-modal exegeses (text, multimedia, live performance, Internet works). In terms of replication, it would be rare, nonsensical even, that one project could be re-located in ways that literally replicate the sciences. Rather, projects tend to inspire others and more accurately, their findings and conclusions act as metaphor for other artists to imagine, 'based on this, then what if?' In this way, artistic research is conversely not so different from other forms of enquiry that usefully 'build on the shoulders of giants'

In closing, it must be said that the most striking aspect of this investigation has been in terms of the interchange between students and supervisors. Less as a master-apprentice model (Harrison & Grant, 2015), this has proven to be a symbiotic process where knowledge exchange between professional networks and the academy continues to evolve. Accounts of 'native' artistic research investigations inspire and provoke via authentic contexts and are ever more clearly articulated and disseminated as visible contributions to the academy, the musician and broader society.

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