What are conservatoires for? Discourses of purpose in the contemporary conservatoire

Biranda Ford

Institute of Education University of London 2010

Chapter six: specialism, practice, technique and interpretation in the conservatoire

Introduction and aim of chapter

This chapter aims to build discourse categories which are constructed, confirmed and

contested in interview texts by isolating instances of participants talking about

selected practices. Focusing on practices derived from my account in chapter 5 of the

historical conservatoire around the performer such as specialisation, personal practice,

technical studies and interpreting music, I look for instances of students and teachers

talking about these practices in the context of a modern conservatoire setting. By

grouping together accounts of particular practices, my aim is to form generalised

descriptions of these practices from individual statements and to see what work these

descriptions accomplish in the discourses they construct, confirm or contest. I also

compare my interview text material to official conservatoire literature and existing

research.

If the scrutiny of individual participant’s texts resembles phenomenology in intent, I

attempt to pursue Foucault’s ‘subjectless phenomenology’ by showing that these

descriptions are not the product of individual initiative or idiosyncrasy, rather they

work towards constructing, confirming or contesting particular discourses at work in

the conservatoire environment. By comparing these descriptions and the discourses

they reference to the discourse of classical music, as articulated in chapter 5 of this

thesis, I am able to assess the extent to which the modern conservatoire continues to

embody discourse originating in the nineteenth century.

For this chapter, I have grouped texts that talk about a particular practice together for

comparison and discussion. Often these practices appear in participants’ accounts, not

as the main topic of conversation, but, by way of responding to other questions in the

interview. For instance, most student accounts of the act of acquiring instrumental

technique emerge in response to questions such as ‘why did you choose your

teacher?’, or ‘what skills or qualities will you need to learn to succeed?’ rather than

from a direct question on the acquisition of technique. Because references to particular practices often occur in unexpected places, I gathered descriptions both by

searching for particular words, for instance, ‘practi’, ‘techni’, ‘interpret’ within

interview texts imported into NVivo, and also by reading the texts in full for when

these practices were being described but not explicitly labelled. In both cases, the

relevant texts were collated into coding categories entitled ‘practice’, ‘technique’ or

‘interpretation’, after which they were analysed for similarities and the discourses they

embodied.

Though I have outlined in my methodology chapter that the interview situation is an

interactive dialogue where both interviewer and interviewee have the ability to

mutually influence each other, for clarity of presentation I only include my questions

where relevant to understanding the participant’s reply, and have disregarded

participants’ responses in analysing the data if I feel in a particular instance that they

were overly biased by my questioning.

Specialism and the principal study

As with the Paris Conservatoire, all student participants studying in my empirical

setting are admitted on the basis of a specialism, called the Principal Study (PS). Whilst

the prospectus (2009, 38) gives a general description – ‘the Principal Study and

performance lie at the core of the learning experience’ – individual department

handbooks stress the nature of the commitment to the PS in more detail, giving

guidelines in hours for expected time to be spent on the PS. Whilst lessons with

instrumental teachers range from 30 hours for classical orchestral instruments in a 36

week academic year for first year students, which amounts to nearly one hour of one

to-one lessons per week with the same teacher, the jazz department, for instance,

offers 48 PS lessons per year to its first year students. There is an increase in the

frequency of lessons in years 3 to 4 across all instruments with, for instance, string

players’ lessons increasing from 30 hours to 45, and keyboard students’ lessons

increasing from 45 to 60, during the same 36 week period.

In terms of credits as well as hours, the prospectus confirms that ‘in the undergraduate

programme, two-thirds of the credits are allocated to PS’ and there is a similar set-up

for postgraduate courses too (ibid). Options also exist to augment the time and credits

allocated to the PS. In years 3 and 4, undergraduate students who receive the required

marks in their assessments can go on to do ‘Advanced Principal Elective Study’ module

A or B, with A requiring a merit level for entry to the module, and B requiring a

distinction level. This module can be taken instead of other academic or practical

elective classes for a further 10 credits.

There are three main ways of expanding on the specialism of the PS, called Joint

Principal Study (JPS), Second Study and learning a ‘doubling’ instrument. Whilst the

learning of a doubling instrument, where a second instrument is also taught if the

relationship between the two is thought to be close, such as flute and piccolo, or violin

and viola, forms a compulsory part of the relevant PS courses, application to the JPS

and second study is more strictly policed. JPS occurs when two PSs are taken in

tandem, for instance, composition and cello performance. It is only permitted by

special application after the student has already been at the conservatoire for a term

and has been assessed to have reached the requisite level across both disciplines and

is thought to be able to cope with the expanded, nearly doubled workload in the case

of the JPS. As a result, only a handful of students in the conservatoire take the JPS

degree option.

Though the second study is an elective, entry to the course is by audition, unlike other

non-performance based elective options such as harmony or composition which can

be chosen as a near beginner. A wind department handbook gives examples of what a

second study might entail:

This might be jazz flute for a classical flautist, clarinet for a saxophonist, singing for a percussionist, composition for a trombonist. [BMus handbook, Tuba , 2009/10, 13]

Whilst it is obvious that ‘singing for a percussionist’ may well be a second study, it is of

note that ‘jazz flute’ is also seen as outside the remit of the PS for a classical flautist.

The specialism of the PS for performers is not just limited to the study of a particular

instrument, but to the genre of music too. Out of the student participants, only three

(S2, S4, S15) talked about taking a second study in the conservatoire, and S2 also talked of taking extra performance classes on what amounted to yet another second

study outside the conservatoire.

In terms of the intensity of specialism for undergraduates, there is no comparison to

other degrees in the provision of one to one lessons and the focus accorded to the PS

as a proportion of the overall curriculum. Even the Oxbridge tutorial system now

teaches students in groups of two or three over a twenty-four week year (Palfreyman,

2001). By contrast, other performance arts programmes, for instance, dance and acting, rely on group class teaching.23

Specialism and practice

Whilst comparison of teaching time contact hours in higher education in general shows

that the frequency of one-to-one contact time with PS teachers is unusual, this is not

the only marker of the specialism that the conservatoire requires and nurtures. The

departmental handbooks make clear that the bulk of a student’s time is to be spent

following up the work generated by the PS lesson in unassisted practice sessions. Most

handbooks give recommended hours for students to allocate to this too, with the input

over a year being given as anything between 546 (strings) to 670 (wind, jazz, keyboard)

hours out of a recommended 800 for the whole year. In a 36 week year, that works out

as between just over two and a half hours to three hours per day, if a student were to practice 6 days a week, only during term time.24

Consistent with the handbooks, student and teacher participants alike admitted to

expectations that solo practice on the principal study was of primary importance.

However, the dedication to personal practice that was voiced in the case of most

students was well above the amount advocated as necessary in the handbooks, with

three hours appearing as the minimum any student pledged to do each day in

instruments such as percussion (S5) and woodwind (S2), to references to ‘practising all

day’ (S5 489-491, T11 6-8 below). Only the vocal department handbook did not specify

23 See for instance, BMus Programme Handbook, Acting. 24 Some handbooks allocate this time as ‘practice’, whilst others, for instance, keyboard, say ‘individual practice and research; ensemble rehearsal’ (BMus Keyboard Handbook, 17), indicating that not all of this time is meant to be spent on just instrumental practice.

Consistent with the handbooks, student and teacher participants alike admitted to

expectations that solo practice on the principal study was of primary importance.

However, the dedication to personal practice that was voiced in the case of most

students was well above the amount advocated as necessary in the handbooks, with

three hours appearing as the minimum any student pledged to do each day in

instruments such as percussion (S5) and woodwind (S2), to references to ‘practising all

day’ (S5 489-491, T11 6-8 below). Only the vocal department handbook did not specify

23 See for instance, BMus Programme Handbook, Acting. 24 Some handbooks allocate this time as ‘practice’, whilst others, for instance, keyboard, say ‘individual practice and research; ensemble rehearsal’ (BMus Keyboard Handbook, 17), indicating that not all of this time is meant to be spent on just instrumental practice.

137

recommended practice hours and instead warned students about the dangers of

damaging the voice through overuse, whilst suggesting other methods of learning

music (BMus Vocal Studies Handbook, 11). For instance S9, a string player, says when

talking about her daily practice:

S9: I do as much as I need but usually I take about 6 hours [...], but I wouldn’t say that was for everyday. And on the day of my lesson I give myself a break. But sometimes it’s not practising; sometimes it's playing for the fun of playing. [S9- 273 [...] 275-276]

S9 states 6 hours, but then qualifies it by saying that this is not quite a daily

occurrence. S13, a jazz musician, also appears to be ‘talking up’ her practice, and

aspires to do much more than she is currently able to do:

S13: At the moment I’m still recovering from tendonitis, I can’t really do more than two hours a day [...]. Ultimately for this like period of time, this block of time when I'm a complete hermit and live in my room and don't do anything, I'm going to be practising every waking hour I've got, I want to be practising or transcribing. That’s my plan and then just like have a couple of evenings off a week or something where I can just not do anything, so see some friends or something. I really wanna have a period of time where all I do is practise and then after that ... I dunno. I dunno. [S13 583-587]

Similar evidence of participants aspiring or claiming to practise more than the official

guidelines in the handbooks are evidenced in texts quoted in the rest of this chapter

across classical and jazz participants. Indicating the quantity of practice that should be

done is often mentioned by students when talking about other aspects of their

practice.

If what students say they do is different from the handbook, this should offer no great

surprise in that handbooks and other institutional literature are often written with the

purpose of satisfying official educational regulations with their hours quotas and credit

units, thus confirming prevalent discourses of higher education (to be discussed in

chapter 7) rather than closely reflecting curriculum content and localised practices.

However, in the case of students practising, the belief that more practice is better

seems to be one particularly nurtured by participants in the conservatoire. My

participant data on personal practice indicated this in the majority of cases, even

though this stands in opposition to research into practice that draws from sports

training and psychology perspectives. This research states that beyond three hours a

138

day, students are not achieving significant gains to their performance capabilities

(Roset i Llobet, Odam and Oliveres i Gili, 2007) and, taking the same line as the Vocal

Studies Handbook, claims that students are opening themselves up to physical injury.

This discourse of musician as a physiological and cognitive entity can be contrasted

with discourses of the artist elaborated in the previous chapter that exist within the

discourse of classical music, most notably the discourse of the unworldly artist, dying

young and diseased, and the discourse of art as a pseudo-religion which similarly

places emphasis on the aesthetic and spiritual aspects of being an artist rather than

any physical, bodily concerns.

When physical strain was mentioned in discussion with one teacher – a wind player –

the impact of it was minimised;

B: I’ve always been slightly jealous of wind players that they say, well, after 3 or 4 hours my lip gives up

T9: no that’s not true. A load of rubbish [...]. It’s never stopped me doing tons of practice. I’ve never had a lip give up any more than string players have got knackered. I’ve done up to 7 hours in a day before if I’d really had to. 3 hours, break, 3 hours, and an hour after dinner, I wouldn’t want to do that every day, but for me personally that’s never been a problem. But only occasionally; [...] it’s like building up to a race or something. You would need to peak at the right time, but I couldn’t keep that every day. [T9: 707-709, 712-716]

Showing similarities to S9’s statement on practice (S9: 273), T9 talks of ‘tons of

practice’ and then qualifies her statement by saying that her seven hours practice is

not done every day. Though T9 describes herself to be careful to prevent injury by

taking precautions to avoid strain, it was notable that amongst all the participants, no

one mentioned the possibility of injury as a possible reason to discourage unlimited

practice, though S13 who professed to wanting to practise ‘every waking hour I’ve got’

stated she already had an injury which was limiting her practice. Similarly, only two

students (S2, S4) and one teacher (T1) mentioned any benefit in doing less practice.

Conservatoire discourse carries a commitment to emphasising marathon-like practice

sessions whilst downplaying the body as a physical entity open to injury.

Only very special circumstances allowed for practice to be sidestepped altogether:

139

T3: You can’t just stand up there and do it, unless you’re a natural, unless you’re a genius. And of course, there have been in jazz natural geniuses, people that never did any study at all – Chet Baker is the classic example, trumpet player, who never did any practice, didn’t have an understanding of music theory, didn’t even know what key he played in. And those people of course are very, very few and far between. So it’s all about hard work!

T3, a jazz teacher, invokes the idea of ‘natural genius’, as a way to obviate the need to

practise. Tapping into discourses of genius which describe music as a divine gift not the

product of human toil, T3 perpetuates a distinction between geniuses who are gifted

enough to not need education or practice to those who have to work to acquire it. My

point here is not to seek to debunk the genius myth, but to observe its effect. T3 in this

case uses it to underline the fact that most performers, as mere mortals, will have to

practise, and practise hard.

Given that in appearance there is a disparity between the amount of practice a student

aspires or claims to do, and recommended amounts in both official literature, written

in higher education’s bureaucratic language of hours and credits, and research which

emphasises a physiological approach, what do participants stand to gain by their

professed commitment to practice? I will refer to the central position of practice for

conservatoire students and the quantity of it they aspire to do, as the ‘practice work

ethic’ and the following section will seek to bring out a description of it by looking at

motivations that appear to drive it, and the work that it appears to achieve for

participants in their accounts.

6.3 The practice work ethic

The practice work ethic appeared as a consistent theme whether it was positioned as

being passed on from teachers to students, or emanating from students themselves. A

string student said:

S1: With my teacher especially, if you semi apply yourself, he doesn’t really want to know. You’ve got to really pull your socks up and it took me a few weeks to learn. [S1: 373-375]

S13 echoes S1’s concern with teacher disapproval if she did not practise enough:

140

S13: It’s just like good to be sort of kept, kept on your feet because if you don’t practise then you get your arse kicked and it’s just like, there’s no one to do that otherwise apart from yourself and your own motivation [...]. [S13 159-162]

T1 does not condone long hours of practice himself, and was the only teacher to

mention this view, but he is aware of the prevalence of the practice work ethic through

his interactions with students and fellow teachers, with varying motivations driving

each of the people he talks about in his examples;

T1: I am aware of one student who I spoke to in an interview and I said ‘how are things going with principal study teacher?’ and she said ‘I don’t feel supported’ and when I asked ‘why?’, she said ‘well I’ve been doing six hours a day practice and my teacher is not pushing me to do more. So clearly he is not supporting me because he doesn’t think that I should be doing any more so he doesn’t think that I’m any good’ [....] So, it is tricky to know [where the urge to practise originates] and I am also aware that certain departments and even reasonably high up in departments bears the sense that actually if you do want to make it you need to be doing seven hours a day of practice and in a meeting it was actually said ‘I can tell you how many hours a day a student will need to do if they are going to be successful, they’re going to have to do this many hours a day practice’. [T1: 470-9]

T1 positions the practice work ethic as emanating from both students and their

teachers. His text above also shows that the practice work ethic can be made to serve

different purposes. In the case of the student account he narrates, the drive to practise

more and more works to display commitment and feelings of validation on the part of

the student, recalling Kingsbury’s observation that ‘many music students \*make an

association] between their musicality and their self-image’ (1988, 5). The story shows a

student using practice to pit her own view of her worth against what she imagines her

teacher’s view to be. She uses quantity of practice as an evaluative term, rather than

an activity with a purpose in itself, with more practice seen as a positive evaluation

and less practice as a negative one. As such her motivations to practise are positioned

by T1 as personal and what I will describe as internal; whilst she looks for external

approval, the reward she seeks is to do with her conception of self. By comparison,

T1’s account of teachers \*T1: 474-9+ uses ‘making it’ and being successful in the

profession – an external measure of success – as a key motivation for practice. In the

next two sections, I present examples of participants’ internal and external motivations

141

to practise to see what the practice work ethic achieves for those who reference it

from these different perspectives.

Internal motivations to practise

Conservatoire students are described favourably by each other as committed to their

studies. One student talks of her undergraduate years at a university:

S11: well, I'd say probably at the time I was a bit of a party animal and I probably wasn’t focused enough and actually coming to a conservatoire like here, I just realised how dedicated the youngsters are and at that time in my life I wasn’t dedicated enough and I wasn’t driven enough and I wasn’t focused enough. [S11-33-36]

S11 marks out conservatoire students as being different from how she saw herself,

using ‘dedicated’, ‘driven’ and ‘focused’ to describe characteristics she lacked, but

which are necessary for conservatoire study. The same language is used by T3 when he

talks about jazz musicians practising, as practice seems to be a key way a musician can

articulate his/her dedication, drive and focus:

T3: I mean jazz musicians that I know have the biggest practices, and the longest and most serious and most focused practices than anyone else I know, jazz musicians are always talking about music and loving it all the time, all kinds of music, not just jazz, and I don’t know, I sometimes get the impression with some straighties that they don’t do that. It’s kind of more like a job. [T3: 496-499]

Combining S11’s appeals to ‘focus’ \*S11: 36+ and T1’s story of the student who uses the

length of practice as an evaluative term [T1: 470-474], T3 aims to legitimate jazz

musicians through similar means. When T3 describes classical musicians or

‘straighties’ as approaching music and practice ‘like a job’, however, he recruits

another device into his legitimation of jazz musicians, comparing those who treat

music as a vocation to those who are ‘loving it all the time’. Making his account of

practice function as a positive evaluation, length, focus, seriousness and motivation

based on a love of music, rather than an external instrumentalist motive, are used to

qualify the worth of jazz musicians.

Just as T3 uses practice to differentiate jazz from classical musicians, S7 uses practice

as a way to mark out conservatoire students from those at university:

142

S7: [...] I could be really controversial and just say people that have been to university can’t come to music college. I mean, that’s being unfair on all people from university because there are some good people, that go to university I know, but … if you’ve made your choice to do marine biology for three years, it’s almost like saying well … what I can’t stand is the arrogance … is that ‘I’ve been to university and hardly practised yet I’m still going to be as good as so-and-so.’ And I … the number of times people have said that to me just … honestly, I … nothing annoys me more because [...] maybe they are, but it’s the arrogance of ‘I can do that.’ I would never say ‘I’ve been to music college for four years, I can go and do marine biology at Oxford.’ I couldn’t … I just couldn’t. You know, ‘cause there wouldn’t be time.

B: Has someone actually said that? Are you speaking from actual experience?

S7: Yeah.

B: OK.

S7: It’s all in the genes, apparently.

B: What is?

S7: Being a good musician. You don’t need to practise.

B: Oh, OK.

S7: Loads of people have said that to me. I mean, it’s not just one person, it’s a few people. And … I just think it’s … I just think it’s absurd. [S7: 762-780]

S7 rejects the idea of ‘natural genius’ and sees practice as the only route to becoming a

good musician. As with the participant extracts above, he makes a positive link

between hours of practice and being a ‘good musician’. But he also holds a dogmatism

that insists that practice must be the primary activity in an aspiring musician’s life;

mixing university study with practice is not seen as a legitimate way to become a

professional musician. Like T3’s insistence that the jazz musician is ‘loving it all the

time’, and S9’s characterisation of the conservatoire student as ‘focused’ and

‘dedicated’, a devotion to the practice work ethic is a way of signalling commitment to

being a good musician, and talk about practice achieves an evaluative function.

External motivations to practise

Whilst the majority of students and teachers cite internal motivations for the practice

work ethic, a few cite external reasons too. Students’ fear of disapproval of their

143

teachers appeared in the texts of S1 and S13 above (S1 373-375; S13 159-162) as a

motivating factor, however, T1, one of two teachers who questioned the practice work

ethic, is the only teacher to posit that students are self-motivated in their practice not

just because they fear their teachers, but because of competition for similar career

goals from their fellow students:

T1: actually it might be profound insecurity about the reality of the situation they find themselves [...] they realise they are looking over their shoulders and they are seeing that people are better, [...] they realise that their future goal can only get there if they have, they are better than the other person so I think they put a lot of pressure on themselves, I am aware of the students here being very serious. I had some students come from where I used to work to do a workshop [...] they were really musical but amidst this they were laughing and joking a lot of the time and our students found that really, really difficult to deal with. [T1: 452-460]

Here, T1 cites vocational goals as fuelling the practice work ethic, contradicting T3’s

talk of disinterested love. Furthermore, whereas S11 and T3 see ‘seriousness’ as a way

to legitimate what they do [S11: 33-36/T3: 496-499], T1 characterises it as an

unnecessary affectation which students willingly adopt to make them feel secure

about their job prospects. After talking about practice T1 then says:

T1: I actually think a place like this does, it takes the enjoyment out of music quite often, because it becomes a serious thing to do, and that is a fundamental flaw here. Students don’t want it to be fun, they want it to be protestant work ethic, we are not happy, if you haven’t had pain then you haven’t had success, it’s that kind of, have to suffer for your art. Now I think that’s for the top students, for the ones below that as well, and in some ways for the ones below that even more so they want to suffer more because it means security because they feel they are making success. [T1: 491-497]

By contrast, students did not overtly link pain and suffering to the practice work ethic

as T1 suggests, and neither did any other teachers.

Summary

Whilst handbooks and research findings recommend that three hours practice a day is

a productive quantity of practice, reflecting discourses of higher education and the

musician as a physical, injury-prone entity, students admit to doing much more. This

commitment to practise as a privileged activity of conservatoire life, which I have

called the practice work ethic holds that the more practice, the better. Participants talk

144

about the practice work ethic, as motivated by both internal and external concerns. I

describe an internal motivation as using talk of the practice work ethic as a positive

evaluation on the part of the participant with more hours of practice signalling a

greater commitment to music. By contrast, one example appeared of a teacher

describing an external motivation for the practice work ethic, with competition

between students for employment outcomes used to explain the phenomenon.

When participants talk of internal motivations for the practice work ethic on their

chosen specialism, they invoke the discourse of classical music; in referencing

disinterested love, focus, seriousness and dedication, participants are tapping into the

discursive formations of music as pseudo-religion as outlined in chapter 5. At first I

interpreted the jazz musicians’ endorsement of classical music discourses as occurring

as a direct result of the jazz musicians absorbing the prevalent discourses in the

conservatoire environment, or a case of trying to ‘beat the classical musicians at their

own game’. However, the more likely explanation is that these discourses are common

not just to classical music, but to all arts practitioners; disinterested love for ‘Art’,

seriousness, focus and dedication can be said to be common constructions of all

musicians since the nineteenth century. Thus classical and jazz musicians can share

common discursive formations whilst differing on others, notably attitudes to improvisation and the authority of the written score.25

T1, the one teacher who uses external motivations as an explanation for the practice

work ethic is informed by discourses of employability. These appear to sit in direct

opposition to the dominant conservatoire discourse of classical music by invoking fear,

not passion, and questioning the seriousness of conservatoire students. Though both

internal and external motivations for practising can have a similar outcome – that a

high standard is achieved – it is notable that disinterested love and employability

appear as incompatible, as with T3’s suspicion of those who treat music and practice

‘like a job’.

25 See Cook (2000, 6-18) on rock musicians and notions of the authentic artist. My thanks to Don Lebler for informing me that pop musicians can share a similar practice work ethic to classical musicians.

145

The only similarity to the discourse of classical music that T1 references, is his talk of

pain and suffering. Whereas nineteenth century artists were depicted as suffering for

their art because of a trade-off that held that artists disregard any thought of financial

reward or social bonds, instead being concerned with the sublime and the divine, T1

constructs their suffering in the name of a worldly concern for employment in the

marketplace. Though the idea of pain and suffering are common to discourses of both

classical music and employment (as in T1’s ‘Protestant work ethic’ 493), the motivation

behind each type of suffering is so different that T1 cannot be described as referencing

a discourse of classical music at all, but rather a modern fear of graduate

unemployment.