The training of contemporary popular musicians

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**By Michael Hannan**

**Introduction**

In attempting to articulate the issues relating to the training of contemporary popular musicians in Australia and to reflect upon my own involvement in it, I feel I should firstly give a brief account of my background as a musician and as an educator. I was trained as a classical pianist and musicologist, but while doing my PhD in musicology I became heavily involved in a number of facets of the music industry as a means of supporting myself financially. These activities, over a period of about ten years, included working in rock bands, establishing an advertising music business, playing in commercial rock musicals and working for AC/DC’s publisher, J Albert and Sons. After a number of years of teaching part-time and sometimes full-time in a few different classical music departments and music schools, I was recruited in 1986 to establish a contemporary popular music program at what is now Southern Cross University.

**Historical perspective of popular music training in Australia**

Before the advent of music training in popular music in Australia, a number of jazz programs were established in the 1970s at Sydney Conservatorium, the Queensland Conservatorium of Music, the Victorian College of Arts, the Canberra School of Music and the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts. These courses have a reputation for their narrow focus on modern jazz performance and arranging.

The Program in Contemporary Music at Southern Cross University in Lismore (near Brisbane) was developed from about 1986 as a degree course dedicated to training musicians and other operatives for the popular music industry in Australia. The program, now offering a three-year Bachelor of Contemporary Music as well as research degrees, is a small one with about 200 undergraduate students and a handful of postgraduates. The decision to establish such a program was prompted by an awareness that there was a niche market in the music education for the practical study of commercial forms of music.

Until 1998 when Macquarie University in Sydney began its degree in contemporary music, and 1999 when the Queensland Conservatorium of Music established its Bachelor of Popular Music on Griffith University’s Gold Coast campus, there have been no other programs fully dedicated to the training of musicians involved in popular music practice.
However a few university-based music schools have incorporated elements of this focus into their programs. From the early 1990s Queensland Conservatorium (Brisbane campus), Queensland University of Technology, the University of Western Sydney, University of Central Queensland and the University of Tasmania entered the market to some extent. In addition the Australian Institute of Music (a private training provider offering a degree program) has been a significant player in Sydney.

Other degree granting institutions have recently followed suit. In 1999 James Cook University in far north Queensland revised its curriculum to include popular music performance; RMIT has developed a one year program to articulate with Victorian TAFE, allowing its diplomates to upgrade to degree level; Victoria University of Technology has developed a degree program in music business and is planning a degree program in practical contemporary popular music in conjunction with Melba Conservatorium.

It appears that by the year 2000 at least 8 of the 37 universities in Australia are offering degrees servicing aspects of the popular music industry in Australia, whereas in 1985 there were none. In addition to this, all the state Technical and Further Education (TAFE) providers offer programs at certificate, diploma and advanced diploma level.

What are the reasons for this mini-revolution in music training in universities and music schools attached to universities. It is fair to say that the field is no longer a niche market. With the institutions that have traditionally focused on classical music, there may be a realisation that a broader market of students needs to be targeted in order for them to survive in an era of declining public support for the arts and increased competition amongst training providers. There is evidence that some institutions may also be seeing the provision of popular music courses and units as a means to subsidise their existing expensive classical music offerings.

On a more positive level there is an equity of access to university issue. Tertiary music training has been traditionally limited to middle class students with a classical music background, most of whom qualify for university entry on the basis of the privately-funded individual music lessons they have received during their primary and high school years, not from the practical music experiences they have received in a public education system. Until now, there has not been an avenue for students with self-taught skills in popular music to study music at university level.

Most young people contemplating university music study, whether classical or popular, wish to do so because their cultural identity is bound up with music making. Few suffer from the misapprehension that when they graduate they are assured of a successful career. But not to give it a go is unthinkable.

The parents of these students feel better if their children get a degree, even if it’s only a music degree.
In actual fact music training (particularly contemporary popular music practical training) is ideal for developing a range of generic skills that employers in other industries are looking for. A selection of these are:

- **Work discipline** (e.g. the rigours of instrumental practice, or programming electronic tracks)
- **Written Communication** (e.g. writing lyrics, promotional material, web site development etc)
- **Oral Communication** (e.g. performing to audiences; working productively with fellow musicians, production personnel and business associates; doing media interviews, networking)
- **Entrepreneurship** (e.g. getting gigs, selling merchandise)
- **Negotiation** (e.g. of the roles of fellow musicians in ensembles; establishing agreements and fees)
- **Personal Presentation** (e.g. grooming, style creation, image creation)
- **Cooperation, teamwork** (e.g. rehearsing; working in the recording studio; working with production teams)
- **Leadership** (e.g. leading a band, directing an ensemble, running a recording session)
- **Creative thinking** (e.g. composing, arranging, experimenting, improvising, developing promotional material)
- **Research, analysis** (e.g. of musical practices, of music industry operation, of markets)
- **Problem solving** (e.g. involvement with complex technology systems)
- **Sense of historical process, contextualising** (e.g. from study of history of music, intellectual property and media legislation, technology development etc)
- **Project management** (e.g. organising a gig, a recording project, a tour)
- **Strategic management** (e.g. planning a career in a complex industry)
- **Crisis management** (e.g. coping when things go wrong in a studio environment, at a gig, on a tour)
- Time management (e.g. meeting deadlines; scheduling rehearsals, gigs, media appearances, travel arrangements)

In addition higher education promotes values that are arguably absent in the commercial sphere (e.g. ethics, caring for people and the environment, connecting professionalism/business activity with the community -giving something back)

Another reason for industry and education planners to develop advanced training for the popular music industry is the possibility of enhancing the economic prospect of a given country. I find the analogue of sport and the arts to be instructive. A relatively small country like Australia (18 million people) has excelled in sporting areas such as swimming, cricket and netball because it has created a unique training infrastructure for its athletes

Australia does all right in the global scheme of things with contemporary music exports, but it could do a lot better through a more structured approach to enhancing the creative, performance, technological and business skills of its commercially viable musicians.

The notion of formal training for contemporary popular musicians is often misunderstood. Traditionally rock and pop musicians have not been institutionally trained but have alternatively developed their own skills and products within an informal training culture. Typically musicians are self-taught, develop their basic skills by exchanging ideas with like-minded people, practice hard in their bedrooms and maybe take some private lessons. Their knowledge of how the industry works is usually based on the experiences of being exploited, and of struggling and often failing in the small business of being a professional musician: the so-called “university of hard knocks”.

However on the next level of success it can be argued that there is a quasi-formal training process at work. Managers, particularly good managers, groom and train their bands or solo artist in a structured and purposeful way. Record companies (such as classic case of Motown in the 1960s) often take this a stage further by employing specialised trainers for the skills and personal attributes relevant to particular genres of musical entertainment.

So, is there a need for university or technical institutional training of musicians. Speaking of the ironies of a classical music university education, Australian academic Malcolm Gillies noted (and this is a paraphrase) that the good students leave before finishing their undergraduate course because they can get well-paid work in orchestras or as soloists. The others stay on thinking if they graduate they might get work. Then when they can’t get a job, they think an extra year doing honours might give them the edge; when that doesn’t eventuate, they think they’d better get a Masters because they’re going to be needing a teaching job in a conservatorium or music department. The same scenario is probably applicable to popular music training.
The institutionalisation of the training of popular musicians is problematic for a number of reasons. I have identified nine problems for discussion:

One: The raw creative and performance energies of young artists may be spoiled by the formalism and/or technical standards imposed by the academy. Students of performance confronted with the high-level skills of their tutors and the technical regimes that are set in order to advance instrumental technique are invariable forced to interiorise and intellectualise the performance process such that they lose the excitement that they had on entry to the institution.

One of our industry benefactors, former head of the publisher Warner Chappell Australia (John Brommell) explained to me that the problem with our course was that the musicians came in playing like this (imitates a alternative rock stance and movement of playing guitar) and they go out like this (imitates more of a classical or jazz posture)

Two: The desire to succeed in the cut-throat music industry may be dissipated by the comfort of university lifestyle. Universities can promote a fiercely competitive environment, but attending a rock and roll university like the one I work at is a relatively stress-free experience.

Three: Identity, notions of authenticity and personal vanity are confronted in the training process.

Good performance (or composition, production etc) doesn’t just happen, you’ve got to analyse it, experiment, work on it, practice it, perform it, analyse your performance, re-work the ideas etc. What may appear to be “natural” is actually highly “contrived” or self-conscious (e.g. what to do with your hands, or the microphone, how to move on stage, what you say to your audience, how you construct an improvised solo etc etc.).

Four: The successful practitioners of one era are not necessarily the best teachers or curriculum advisors in the next.

In my work I have confronted two types:

(1) the mainstream rock star:
This type believes that their way of doing things has to be right because they were so successful. They can’t accept that they may have been even more creatively or technically versatile and innovative, or even more commercially viable, if they had acquired certain skills that they didn’t have.

(2) the session musician:
These musicians have all the chops to imitate anything in any style that’s gone before, but mostly they lack the vision or desire to create anything new, vital or radical.
The best role model is probably the producer who tries to make something out of what’s already there, maybe enhance it, but not try to change it too much.

Five: Historically inappropriate approaches to music performance and composition are often introduced:

(a) Reading charts: most popular musicians learn to play music by ear, either imitating recorded music or learning originals from their co-musicians. Charts are a legacy of the jazz era. They are anachronistic in the post-MIDI era.

(b) Writing charts: Frank Zappa characterised classical music training as learning to write in forms that “cater to the entertainment needs of deceased kings and popes”. Learning to write charts in different popular music styles is probably the contemporary version of this phenomenon.

(c) Outmoded styles: As non-classical performing musicians become more technically skilled they tend to veer towards jazz. I have observed that the highly skilled contemporary musicians we employ tend to try to indoctrinate their students with what I call the jazz virus. Even though these students may be studying the styles of contemporary popular music of their own choice, infection with the jazz virus is inevitable for some of them. For composers the equivalent viruses are the contemporary classical and orchestral viruses.

Performance teachers need to be better players than the students and quite versatile in order to be able cover everything everyone wants to learn or that is in the syllabus (although many of them draw the line at learning or teaching certain styles and practices). Session players (carriers of the jazz virus) fit this bill.

Six: The ideal curriculum may be too expensive to teach. Traditionally in practical music courses, the student has to specialise in performance or in composition. It is too difficult and expensive to deal with more than this. However contemporary popular music practice typically involves instrumental performance, vocal performance, songwriting, record production and business skills in equal amounts.

Seven: Curricula developed from analysis of competencies in the industry are often diluted or distorted to fit some idealised educational product.

Just what is the music industry? Is it bands striving for success at the bottom of the pyramid, subsidizing the few successful outfits in the middle, and a very few successful popstars at the top?

The music industry machine tends to ignore anything not associated with performing, recording and releasing original material within fairly tight stylistic boundaries.
Anything else is ignored, even if you can make money from it (e.g. cover bands, tribute bands, piano bar performers, entertainers at resorts and on cruise ships, backing bands in clubs, backing musicians for touring artists, contemporary theatre musicians, session musicians for jingles and other recordings; DIY labels, media composers, multimedia composers, theatre composers, sound designers).

Thus, in framing contemporary music training what professional activities do you target?

Eight: Even if you have certain skills they may not necessarily help you. For example the skill to negotiate is useless until you are in a position to negotiate, usually not until you have already achieved significant success.

Nine: The raw realities of the music industry do not mesh with university values.

How do you ethically teach people to deal with a culture that is characterised by greed, exploitation, fashion fascism (to borrow Philip Adams’ phrase), sexual discrimination and harassment; where appearance is everything, and where business is essentially a form of gambling, throwing a lot of promotional money at something to see if it will sell?

Despite these problems, I don’t mean to be negative about the idea of training musicians at tertiary level.

On the positive side the experience of studying practical contemporary music in a tertiary context can enhance the prospects of students through the provision of the following:

- Mentorships from industry professionals;
- Resources for study (comprehensive library of recordings, arrangements, books, trade journals, academic publications etc);
- A well-equipped learning environment (recording studios, workstation laboratories, practice facilities);
- A lot of like minded people (students and staff) from whom to choose collaborators;
- A chance to develop in an individual way, The curriculum and assessment procedures should be tailored to facilitate individual development and individual projects;
- Practical skills (music technology, music business, occupational health and safety);
- Musical techniques (broadening the performance and composition skill base);
- Networking opportunities with industry personnel and graduates;
- Work experience opportunities; and
• Academic skills which may have a more long-term application.

Conclusions:

The field of popular music education and training in the contemporary popular music field has burgeoned in the last decade in Australia. Many classical music training institutions have embraced the idea, for a variety of reasons including broadening their access to the potential student market. There are many pitfalls associated with this field, the principal one being the appropriateness of the training provided. There are however sound economic and cultural reasons for the promotion of this new field and the refinement of its operations.