"You'll have to start early if you want to be on time for the F sharp!" Language and the study of music: Implications for international students studying in tertiary music programs in Australia

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Abstract

Writing about music is fundamental to the study of music in a university. This may not be surprising to most people familiar with study in tertiary institutions in Australia. However, many aspiring young musicians coming from overseas to study music in Australia are not prepared for this aspect of their music education. Their lack of preparedness is, first, in understanding what the academic requirements are in tertiary music courses, and second, in meeting those requirements. Regardless of whether a student is studying in a Performance, Composition, Technology, Pedagogy or Musicology strand of the degree, they will be required to write academic papers on or related to music. This paper investigates the nature of language in music study, the nature of pre-tertiary English courses and how courses might better prepare international students for a tertiary music program.

Keywords tertiary music study, language needs, International English Language Testing System (IELTS), English for Academic Purposes (EAP), sustained content-based instruction.

Introduction

Several universities in Australia attract valuable full-fee paying international students to their music degree programs at the undergraduate and postgraduate level. Of the small variety of music specialisations undertaken, the Performance strand generally attracts more international students than Music Education, Composition or Musicology. While the emphasis in a Performance degree is on musical ability, academic study based on music research is fundamental to the study of music at a university. International students not only undertake these studies in a second or other language, but also in a different academic and musical culture. Their expectations and training are different from those of local students who have grown up in a Western education system. Consequently, accomplishing academic tasks about music in English is challenging. Not surprisingly, problems may ensue.

Central to these problems is the nature of the verbal language of music instruction and study. Far from being a universally technical language, much of the language of music is complex, metaphorical and culturally embedded. For international students studying in a second or other language, difficulties with this language become apparent in their writing. A student's writing is clear evidence of their understanding and application of the language. It is also a measure of academic success in a music degree.

For over ten years, I have observed international students struggle through the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) preparation courses and testing in order to reach their goal of studying music at a tertiary level. For those who gain the entrance score, the struggle is only just beginning. This is because it is not unusual for international music students in Australia to encounter the language of their study area, the language in English that is, for the first time in the first year of their degree. This is no small challenge and the language disadvantage these students experience should be avoidable. In this paper, I discuss the problem and how it might be addressed.

Background

The study of music occupies an unusual position amongst the disciplines, with regard to language needs. Music is generally known to have a technical language which places it alongside Maths and Science. However, on closer observation it is surprising just how far from the technical the language of music strays.

To illustrate the language demands of music study in a tertiary music setting, I take the example of Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University, a tertiary music institution with one of the highest numbers of non-native speaking students in Australia. In 2006 there were 51 full-fee paying international students at Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University from non-English speaking backgrounds. Table 1 shows the distribution of non-native speaking students across various music degree programs at Queensland Conservatorium in 2006.

Table 1. QCGU international students from non-native speaking backgrounds in 2007

Country	Number	Country	Number
China	13	Brunei	1
Japan	8	USA	1
Norway	7	France	1
Taiwan	6	Vietnam	1
Korea	5	Italy	1
Malaysia	4	Colombia	1
Indonesia	3	Netherlands	1
Thailand	3	Germany	1
Singapore	2	Brazil	1
Zimbabwe	1	Mexico	1
UK	1	Finland	1
TOTAL			**64**

To enter a music program at Queensland Conservatorium, an international student must first pass an audition, usually done via a recording of appropriate repertoire and produced by the student under strict conditions. Alternatively, the student may come to Australia for a live audition. For international students, there is no written aspect to the audition. If the audition is successful, the student is then required to meet the English language proficiency level required by the university. The majority of international students who come to Queensland Conservatorium routinely study English in an English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) institution to achieve proficiency level. In other words, they follow the same path of English training as other international students preparing for entrance into diverse university programs, undertaking courses in General English, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and IELTS Preparation. They take the Academic Module of the IELTS test and try and try again, if necessary, to achieve the requisite score of 6 for undergraduate courses, and 6.5 or higher for postgraduate courses.

What is important here is that while IELTS and EAP prepare students for an English speaking university environment, they do not specifically address the nature and degree of complexity of specific target languages, such as the language of music study. The courses are designed to improve *general* language proficiency. As a result, international music students spend a great deal of money and time on English instruction that does not address the particular language demands of their future study. In the following sections, I raise some issues concerned with meeting language demands in tertiary music study. First, I describe the nature of the language encountered in this area of study. I then describe the level of language proficiency required for entrance into tertiary music study, and I explain why international students may continue to experience difficulty with the language requirements of music study, when they have met the language entrance requirements for the program. In conclusion, I propose a possible way forward.

The nature of the language in use in tertiary music study

Languages of disciplines comprise a rich lexicon that is constantly evolving. Music is no exception. One reason for this constant evolution is that the invention of new music, based on new schemes and new technology, has never stopped. The sociocultural context also changes over time and across cultures and with it, ways to describe our experience of music. We do not experience music in the same way today as a performers or an audience in Mozart's time, nor do we discuss our experience of music in English the same as one might in a tribal language in New Guinea.

Within the rich and evolving lexicon there is a technical register, largely able to be accessed by dictionary, but nonetheless daunting in its volume. A dictionary, being a snapshot of a common use of language at a particular time, does not accommodate the more specialised vocabulary of a particular speech community. There are many speech communities in music, each with its own vernacular and lexicon, and each may be associated with a particular genre, like Jazz; or era, like Baroque, or even schools of music. New lexicons may also emerge, these days quite rapidly, alongside new waves of technology in music composition and new ways of experiencing music. For example in Classical music, we talk about melodic "contours"; the music holds together because the melodic line has particular shape and form. As we listen, the music is recognisable by its shape and form. The shape of this melodic line can be characterised in terms of an arch where the musical phrase ascends and descends. In Classical music, to describe this movement, a melody may typically soar or linger, fall or leap, or it

may wander. On the other hand, in the mid-twentieth century experimental music movement, Musique Concrète, the principle underlying the organisation of the music is not melody in the Classical sense and the verbal description of the music makes use of different word associations. We might instead discuss the collage effect of sound, scattering or shattering sound, shifting timbres and drifting textures. The composer may draw on "chance" for organisation of pitch and duration, timbre and texture and may include "processed" as well as "unprocessed" sounds. Studying music at a tertiary institution requires a familiarity with the many approaches to thinking about music and expressing the experience of it in words.

There is also the matter of "translatablility" from one language to another. Cultures may share similar concepts in music, but this does not mean that they share similar linguistic expressions for them. Ethnomusicologist and linguist Steven Feld explains, for example, the notion behind intervals of music in Kaluli language of central New Guinea. In Kaluli, what we call in English a "descending minor third", they call a "waterfall" (1981, p. 30).

To further illustrate issues of lexicon and "translatability", consider the property of pitch, a physical property of sound. In English, we speak of "up" and "down" in relation to the pitch spectrum, and higher and lower too. These are very important descriptions integral to expressing the experience of music in English; however, as music philosopher Roger Scruton points out, these descriptions are not literally true (1997, p. 14). For Scruton, our experience of music involves an elaborate system of metaphors and in English, those metaphors anchor around space, movement, and animation (1997, p. 80). Scruton further notes that not every language is like English in using "high" and "low" or their equivalents for the two ends of the spectrum. The French, for example, use "aigu", meaning sharp, pointed, piercing, keen, penetrating, screaming (Dubois, 1981, p. 19) and "grave", meaning sedate, solemn, important, weighty (Dubois, 1981, p. 369).

Music analyst Marion Guck's essay further demonstrates the complexity of associations in an English speaker's vocabulary, describing a musical passage thus:

> As the prelude opens, the left-hand melody sweeps up through arpeggiatting sixteenth notes to hover on D, drawn out by its lower neighbor in languorous quarter-dotted eighth-sixteenth. A lingering three-eighth note fall through the same arpeggio closes in sedate steps. The sheer registral span makes an arch of the melody's contour; and the progressive lengthening of sweep, hover, and lingering fall make it graceful. Dynamics, too, swell and shrink as the line rises and falls. (1997, p. 204)

A more informal vernacular comes into play in the verbal instructions and exchanges during a music lesson or rehearsal: the language used by the teacher in bringing a piece of music to life; in describing how to achieve style, character, mood and technical aspects of the music; in negotiating with a student, or giving an instruction for how a piece of music might be interpreted, practised and performed. Here one finds a common use of similes, metaphors, and figurative conventions that are so well established or otherwise obvious in the language that they often go unnoticed to native speakers. Below are just a few examples:

- Carry the note to the end of the bar!
- It needs to be a fatter sound!
- These notes have hips, but not like Claudia Schiffer's!
- Phrases are like relationships you can't just start and end them!
- That sounded like blow flies in a jam jar!
- Hold on! That section's a bit dodgy!
- Bring out the F sharps!
- The tempo is tending to drag!
- I need more space between the notes!
- The sound was harsh, what we need is warm!
- Strings, take up the melody here!

The examples show how we often find a discreet use of metaphor, often unconsciously delivered because it is part of our everyday speech in English. Even everyday verbs like "drop" in "Don't drop the tempo!"; "give" in "Give me a note!"; "push" in "Don't push the tempo!"; and "pick" in "Pick it up from bar 35!"; have metaphoric reference in music instructions. Phrasal verbs such as "bring out" and "pick up", with their own non-literal connotations, are particularly prevalent in music instructions. The musical meanings of these expressions, however, cannot be found in a standard dictionary. These expressions are often delivered in the form of an instruction and therefore require action so understanding the message these expressions convey, is quite important.

The fact that we try to articulate the inexpressible in music is already a challenge. When this is combined with our attempts to communicate through words that have layers of meanings and associations, the result is not a simple message. Nonetheless, this is the nature of the language a student will encounter in a tertiary music course in all aspects of undergraduate and postgraduate music courses – including lectures, assignments, examinations, individual lessons, rehearsals, and informal discussion.

Typical language assessment tasks

A student in an undergraduate degree at Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University will undertake literature courses as well as theory, aural training and a practical study. The course known as Music Style and Context, for example, is delivered in lectures and assessed by means of assignments and invigilated examinations. This undergraduate course is assessed through a research assignment with a range of 1,200 - 1,500 words, worth 40% of the final mark. The criteria for assessing the research assignment include appropriate style of presentation and format; conciseness, clarity and accuracy of expression; coherence of discussion or argument; maturity of discussion; and appropriate use of sources. Other types of written assessment involve concert reviews and reflective journals and some courses require oral presentations. In addition, there are short essay components in the final examination. Such language tasks are linguistically demanding.

What level of language proficiency, then, is deemed adequate for a non-native speaker to read, listen to, comprehend, interpret, synthesise, paraphrase, and finally, to generate the language required for these tasks?

The level of language proficiency required for tertiary music study

As for other undergraduate and postgraduate courses in Australian universities, undergraduate music courses at Queensland Conservatorium require a minimum IELTS score of 6, and postgraduate courses require a minimum of 6.5. According to the *IELTS handbook* (July, 2001, p.20), the score of 6 identifies the student as a "competent user" who has effective command of the language despite inaccuracies, inappropriacies, and misunderstandings. A student who has attained this level can use and understand "fairly complex language in familiar situations". The word "familiar" in this context should not be overlooked because it is familiarity with the target language that is central to the issue of student success in music programs.

Why international students experience difficulty meeting the academic standards when they have met the language entrance requirements.

It is worth considering how the language that is being measured in tests of general language proficiency is relevant to the study of music. In *The development of second language proficiency* (Harley et al., 1990), language proficiency is described as embracing grammatical, socio-linguistic and discourse competence. However, this text also indicates that what constitutes *sufficient* language proficiency to survive academically is a controversial issue. Being proficient in a language is not necessarily related to being able to manipulate a language in a specific academic context. Even students who have met the required language proficiency score to enter Queensland Conservatorium often still lack skills required for successful completion of their tertiary studies. A survey conducted in 1996 on attitudes to IELTS within the English language teaching profession revealed some skills not covered in IELTS (Deakin, 1998, p.7): these included both academic skills such as understanding academic requirements, interpreting assignment tasks, and avoiding plagiarism, and understanding specific subject concepts, specialised language and vocabulary. Some of these skills may be acquired in English for Academic Purposes courses – but not the skills relating to the study of specific music subjects.

One of the issues here is that the generic approach to academic writing in IELTS and EAP does not prepare students for academic writing about music. In music research, rather than analysing and describing graphs and tables, music students analyse and describe music examples, music processes and excerpts from music scores. Students coming through the Australian school system and undertaking Music as a course of study at school are likely to have become acquainted with appropriate ways of formatting and referencing music examples and writing about music. This is not so for all international students.

Additionally, there is the problem of the score of 6 in IELTS being too low for a tertiary music course which requires a linguistically demanding use of English. Macrae (1997, p.134) outlines recommendations on English proficiency to university applicants in the UK. He says that an IELTS score of 6 is the minimum level for university study in technical subjects such as Applied Sciences and Mathematic*s*. He also includes a description of the meaning of IELTS scores in terms of academic capability. Here it states that an English user with a level of 6 will cope with linguistically less demanding courses such as Mathematics and Computer-Based Studies. However, as I have shown, music courses are not based simply on technical language and are not linguistically less demanding. Academic competence in the study of music relies on a student's ability to analyse, interpret,

synthesise and generate complex language which, under the present system, most international students would be encountering for the first time in their first year of tertiary study. The IELTS Handbook states, however, that the score of 6 indicates that the candidate can use *complex* English language in *familiar* situations. This must surely mean that the study of *music* in the medium of *English* should be *familiar* to a student at the commencement of their tertiary course.

With little or no background in the language of the discipline and with no test to indicate a student's competency in the language of music, there is little to demonstrate whether the student is ready to manage the language and academic requirements of their study area.

One way forward

One way to success in related tertiary contexts has been clearly identified in research into content-based instruction (CBI). Even as far back as 1984 second language learning and literacy expert Jim Cummins was arguing that students learn basic interpersonal communication skills in a relatively short time (note, approximately two years in school) but that these language skills are not sufficient for students to succeed in academic learning contexts. Instead, students need to learn "cognitive academic language proficiency" (CALP), if they are to succeed in academic second language learning contexts. The development of CALP however takes much longer. On this matter, Snow and Brinton (1997, p. 8) conclude:

> [p]ostponing content instruction while students develop more advanced academic language is impractical and ignores students' complex educational needs. Students need to be learning content information while they are acquiring CALP… the need for more demanding language abilities suggests that CBI (Content-Based Instruction) approach would be the most effective way for students to develop CALP.

A tenet of CBI is that language is a medium for learning content and content is a resource for learning language. A sustained content-based approach recognises the importance of the target language, the medium of study. In such an approach language is learnt in a simulated college/professional setting, with all its reading, writing, listening and speaking components. Students learn skills because they need them for the "pressing job of grasping content" (Pally, 1999, p.1). What is different here from a standard IELTS or EAP setting is that one subject is studied for a sustained period of time. Pally concludes from her study that such an approach provides information that students can "accrue, compare, contrast, question or synthesize" (1999, p.8). Pally's motivation for study of CBI arose from "pondering essays" that she could not understand. These essays were written by NESB graduate students who had high TOEFL scores, had gained entrance into a prestigious university and were expected to perform alongside native speakers in their graduate programs. In investigating the reason for this breakdown of communication, Pally found that students had never previously been required to produce "'text responsible' work, master the content, its vocabulary, forms, methods ... None had followed a subject long enough to synthesize information" (1999, p. 9). Pally summarises the type of course where this can happen as one where students gather information from print, oral and electronic sources; draw out central points of that information; discuss, synthesize and question that information; become familiar with the argumentations and rhetorical conventions of a discipline; and write over a period of time long enough so that both ideas and prose may be revised.

Citing the work of Leki and Carson, and Fredrickson, Hagedorn and Reed among others, Pally (1999, p.10) recommends a change in focus in ESL classrooms from the "grab bag" (Leki and Carson's term, ibid, p. 10) of different topics to in-depth treatment of a subject. This in-depth treatment, based on language and content that increases in sophistication such that comprehension of later material depends on the grasp of earlier material, allows for development of a coherent framework of knowledge on a particular topic and is closer to authentic academic work. Pally concludes that if ESL/EFL teachers do not provide *sustained* content, they are not equipping students with the tools for tertiary education which rely on formulating sophisticated ideas and backing them up. These tools can only be gained from "extensive" reading and writing on a topic (1999, p.13).

Further support for CBI comes from Kasper (1997) who attests that content-based instruction at the intermediate level of English language proficiency facilitates a non-native speaking student's subsequent performance in college academic mainstream courses and increases their likelihood of earning a college degree.

On the Australian music education scene, a model of content-based instruction was developed in the early 1990s for pre-tertiary international students preparing to study at Queensland Conservatorium. Designed by a team of teachers at Queensland College of English to cater for the needs of a growing number of these students, this model might have been the answer to the problem. Its demise was related to two factors. Firstly, for economic viability, it relied on a minimum number of students – all of whom needed to be international music students –

to attend the course at a given time. This is not likely to occur in Music unless there is a major change in marketing strategies by universities. Secondly, the model was driven by IELTS testing strategies and the requirement of sitting the IELTS test, which proved to be quite a distraction for the students who believed that it was more important to prepare for the test than to improve their English for the music content of their future study.

What I suggest is a way forward by which the need for financial viability of English courses could be reconciled with flexible and adaptive measures that will serve the client best. First, language centres and universities need to the take focus off developing generic academic skills at higher levels and facilitate greater involvement for students in their specialist study area or profession. This requires that on a global scale agencies through which international students deal, language centres and university faculties rethink the appropriateness of IELTS, in its current format, as a preparation and measure of language for entrance into all university programs. The way forward is about cooperative, collaborative practice between faculties, the stakeholders, and language centres, the training providers.

Such a "rethink" has recently been endorsed by Griffith University, making it possible for students to gain direct entry into their degree programs. Griffith English Language Institute (GELI) has developed a Direct Entry Pathway (DEP), which is a high level English for Academic Purposes program designed for students who have received a conditional offer for tertiary studies at Griffith University. Upon completion of DEP, students who successfully pass are not required to take a formal English test but go directly into their degree. The program is designed around the actual tasks and English language skills required for undergraduate and postgraduate study. However, the problem of the lack of discipline specific language tasks in a sustained content-based framework remains.

GELI and Queensland Conservatorium have recently been discussing ways of facilitating early contact with the study area for students with conditional offers for music programs. To a certain extent, this is made possible by the Conservatorium (in other words, the music faculty of the university) employing a specialist ESL teacher who can liaise with the language centre. The Conservatorium employs the ESL teacher to provide sustained content-based instruction for non-native speaking students in the first year of their degree. This sheltered program delays entry into the mainstream literature courses, which are the most linguistically and academically demanding, and the course attracts credit points so that students undertaking this pathway can complete their degree program in the normal timeframe. Ideally, the services of the ESL teacher could be extended to enable content-based language tuition to begin in the pre-tertiary language course of the music student.

Aptly put, words get you everywhere, especially in an academic community. But importantly, knowing the language of a discipline makes you feel like part of that community and is likely to lead to a more successful study experience. The responsibility lies with all educators and educational institutions involved with international students to ensure that they receive appropriate English instruction to meet the linguistic demands of academic tertiary study in all disciplines. Sustained content-based English instruction at pre-tertiary level that is not driven by IELTS test preparation would seem to be a responsible pathway for international students aiming to study music.

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