Teaching the Eighteenth Century: Historical Study through Performance

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AFTER A DECADE of delivering the contents of my eighteenth-century opera module (“Opera in England from Purcell to Handel”) through a series of lectures, I had a clear sense that this approach invariably met with mixed levels of engagement and attainment on the part of my students. The lecture format was not engaging my students to develop an appreciation of how these “old” operas were once important participants in eighteenth-century culture. I felt distanced from their learning processes since attempts to incorporate devices such as “brain storming” or discussion groups within the class elicited immediate and therefore necessarily superficial responses.

I wanted to refresh my teaching of this course and to increase my students’ motivation to learn. Since my own reason for studying music at university was a love of performing it, I decided to design the module around an historical performance project to engage my learners, the vast majority of whom study performance as part of their degree. Using students’ known interests to enhance their learning is a tactic validated by the observations of Lynn McAlpine, who stresses the importance of stimulating learner motivation by “linking learning to personal experiences to enhance relevance” (124). McAlpine’s instructional model features the phases of engagement, informing, practice, and summative assessment, and places a particular emphasis on “practice” – i.e. providing “activities for students to rehearse, perform, [and] apply” (126). It is at this part of the process that the learner is active, so this is the logical focus of a learner-orientated instructional model. How better to incorporate “practice” into an historical opera module than by producing a historically
informed performance with my students? At the same time, I hoped that this mode of teaching the cultural values of the eighteenth century would assume an immediate relevance for them.

Teaching Delivery and Assessment

Changing the focus of my module from a teaching orientation to a learner-based model required some significant alterations. It had been taught through single weekly lectures of two hours’ duration over the course of a twelve-week semester. It was assessed through one shorter essay, and a seminar presentation linked in topic to a longer essay. The delivery and assessment were entirely characteristic of courses classified as “historical topics” within our Bachelor of Music degree. While I needed to retain some lectures to introduce topics to the students, I refocused these to consider aspects of historical performance practice, also offering one session that provided some context regarding that year’s chosen project. Lectures evolved into workshops, where students explore issues such as applying ornaments to arias, or the proper pacing of recitatives, through a mixture of discussion and performance. Thus frequent and immediate opportunities to “practice” were embedded in the module design.

Contact hours were expanded to include regular and extensive rehearsal (i.e. practice) sessions and provided a forum for offering regular feedback to the students. The grading criteria changed to reflect the new design of the module. As the rehearsals became such a central part of the learning experience, it seemed essential to factor them into the assessment. In the early rehearsals, students are assessed particularly on their preparation and application, because they will normally be given set targets and explicit goals each week. As they gain control over the material, “performance” is increasingly factored into the rehearsal mark.

The students also have two pieces of summative assessment. The first takes place during a live performance of the opera they have been rehearsing throughout the semester; as McAlpine advocates, “the activities experienced during the practice phase accurately represent what will be assessed summatively” (129). Their second piece of summative assessment is a learning journal. This format was favoured over the more traditional essay as it encourages students to reflect on the

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“Opera in England” projects, with dates of original productions

2007: Giovanni Bononocini’s *Camilla* Act 2 (London, 1706)
2008: G.F. Handel’s *Terpsichore* (London, 1734)
2009: Henry Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* (London, 1686?)
2010: Handel & the Singers of the London Stage, 1711–1744
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process involved in learning their roles. Thus, the written work also benefits from the extended period of structured practice.

Choice of Opera

Each year, I identify a project that suits the students who enrol in the module. Provisional enrolments are available to me about seven months before the start of each project. I tailor each project to the available singers, sometimes recruiting from year-two undergraduate or Master’s levels of study (these students can receive a credit for their performance through other modules), and sometimes drawing on volunteers to fill out the requirements of the work. While most of the singing roles are taken by students who also study vocal performance as part of their degree, drama students have successfully taken part, as have music students who are not “first-study” singers. After an audition the roles are assigned, taking into account the individual’s experience as well as other personal qualities that might suit them for a particular part.

The students invariably learn to sing, act, and play in a historically informed manner. As a trained harpsichord player with some experience of studying baroque dance, I offer some relevant expertise, but further specialist teaching support is needed, and can vary from project to project. The 2007 opera involved continuo accompaniment and a team of seven singers. The harpsichord continuo player had already been trained in the basic techniques required through a year-two undergraduate course, “Continuo”; this project offered him an extensive practical apprenticeship in applying his knowledge while developing an ability to respond to the drama in his improvised accompaniment. An injection of institutional funds permitted the appointment of period gesture specialist Ian Caddy to conduct a series of workshops with the singers. In 2008, I had a high concentration of string players enrolled in the module, and relatively few singers. Thus, we picked a work (Handel’s Terpsichore) with few singing roles and abundant instrumental pieces (dances). The students worked with professional baroque dancer Edith Laloner who taught them how to articulate the rhythm clearly, as well as how to maintain a steady pace and provide a constant energy, all necessary to support the dance. I prepared the players for working with the dancer by having them walk to baroque dance music variously executed (i.e. sometimes rather erratically); they soon internalized what was needed in their own playing. In 2011, I had the appropriate singers to perform Handel's Alcina, but as there was not a large body of orchestral players taking the course, members of the school’s chamber orchestra were persuaded to participate on a volunteer basis. This was the most demanding work we had undertaken, and funds were raised or accessed to bring in a professional singer and a specialist conductor to give workshops, as well as to renew our contact with Ian Caddy. I offered further support by editing the three-and-a-half hour work down to a more manageable two hours.
Sometimes the delivery or assessment of the module is tweaked to respond to particular projects. In 2009, I had a critical mass of both singers and instrumentalists, so we could attempt Henry Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas*. While the previous works were readily broken down into discrete units for the purposes of rehearsal, the relatively fluid scene structure in this piece meant that we had to work as a complete team for most of the time. It is probably no coincidence that this group demonstrated the best team spirit of all the projects to date. In 2010, I had no tenors or basses (thus making an actual opera impossible to cast), so we produced a pair of concerts in which each of my singers performed the repertory of a particular eighteenth-century singer. In addition to writing the learning journal, students also investigated the career of their assigned singer for an assessed program note. As before, all elements of summative assessment were linked. Each project might demand slight changes in assessment and delivery, but the broad thrust of the course remains intact, with a constant focus on eighteenth-century cultural practice.

**The Student Learning Process**

The emphasis on rehearsals and group discussion during the lecture-workshops places the students in a particular learning environment that has been described as “situated cognition.” The learning takes place “within a community of practice in which knowledge is socially constructed” (McAlpine 123). The students appreciate this interactive approach to learning, as one of them noted: “this module is very much driven around [our] interpretation and discussion by the students… Other people’s contribution to the discussions prompts you to think about something in a way you may not have done otherwise.” In these projects, the group interacts even more intimately than a troupe of theatrical performers. Students develop a heightened intellectual appreciation of how group work can clarify aspects of historical performance. As one of the string players for Handel’s *Terpsichore* discovered, “the dancer had to be treated as another member of the string ensemble and not as a separate entity.” The string players also realized that they could learn from the period acting style, as one of them observed that rehearsing with singers “helped to promote a collective understanding of the emotive character of each scene, allowing the strings to actively support the emotions displayed in the singers’ gestures by mimicking them in their playing.” For the singers, the concept of “team work” offered guidance on their performance when they were part of a scene but not the focus of attention;
one singer wrote, “I explained that we could heighten Dido’s emotional output by our own sympathetic gestures as we listened…[P]articularly during her lament, we were able to create a framed picture around her.”

Situated cognition can feature a “cognitive apprenticeship…in which students learn to use authentic tools in authentic activities” (McAlpine, 123). The summative assessment and the practice leading up to it are the “authentic activities.” The “tools” my students can access include their workshop instructors, treatises and articles, CDs, as well as visual sources ranging from eighteenth-century engravings to YouTube clips. In recent years, access to electronic resources such as Eighteenth-Century Collections Online has opened up a wealth of valuable eighteenth-century sources. T.A. Wilkes’s *A General View of the Stage* (1759) offers a particularly useful chapter: “Of the various Passions; how to express them in Speaking, Looks, and Action”; and the series *Bell’s British Theatre* (1776–1778) provides pictures of contemporary actors in attitudes (stances) characteristic of particular passions. The website of Ian Caddy, our period gesture specialist, www.BaroqueGestures.com, is another central resource. With a mixture of modern and period source material, the reading list remains fairly constant in its contents. Additional texts (such as Hilton or Laloner on dance) are added as appropriate to reflect a particular project’s scope.

Even with the intense levels of support offered, there was much that the learners had to work out for themselves. The (historically-valid) codified approach to both musical and acting styles renders eighteenth-century theatrical works particularly accessible to young learners. They learn about the acting style by reading Barnett, Benedetti, and Lax, and about the musical style by reading Dean and Quantz (among others). Students describe the impact that their research process has on their own performances in their learning journals. They use their
research in their performances. As one student remarked, “My success, I feel, lies in the reading I did and applying this to the rehearsal process.”

With the immediate prospect of a public performance, students quickly develop the independence needed to identify appropriate sources to research specific queries. As one student put it, “I wasn’t exactly sure...‘how to walk’ across the stage...I decided to view two DVDs, one on fencing and the other on baroque dance...All movements were elegant and agile, with a clear sense of direction. This gave me a useful insight into ‘how to walk!’” The orchestral players make particular reference to a modern edition (Wilson) of various treatises by Georg Muffat (1653–1704), a German musician who describes the contemporary bowing practices of both the Italian and French schools of string playing. One of the viola players in Terpsichore applied Muffat’s instruction to use an up-bow (for the second and third notes of any lively piece with three beats per bar) to the chaconne. She was pleased to note that “this brought lightness to the line and also helped to accentuate the down beat of every bar.” One of the singers (Mary McCabe) for the 2011 production used her research to determine the particular gestures she would perform in an aria:

The next aria which Alcina sings is “Sì, son quella”...[It] leaves Alcina very exposed with the sparse accompaniment and this reflects her actual situation as she is being called unfaithful by her beloved Ruggiero. ...In this aria I particularly focused on trying to use positive gestures in the right hand and then negative ones on the left as Lax explains: “Jelgerhuis states that anything which is ‘great, good and noble’ should be taken with the right hand, and anything which is ‘despicable and mean’ with the left. This corresponds to the idea that the right-hand side of the stage was ‘good’ and that the left was ‘bad’” (Lax 13). The negative words would be “non” for example and then the positive would be “sì.”

Viewers should note that the singer’s stance (left) is characteristic of the period, as is the limited range of the hand and arm gestures (i.e. in kind and also in height and breadth). The gestures are precisely timed and have an energy appropriate to the kind of passion being conveyed. Listeners will note that as this is a full da capo aria (ABA structure), the singer is ornamenting on the repeat as is characteristic of the period. She made a deliberate choice to keep her ornaments in this particular aria fairly modest in scope, in keeping with the exposed vulnerability of her character at this point in the drama.

For a video of this student’s performance, see: http://youtu.be/3Nq7nwKT6FE
Through their cognitive apprenticeship, students also develop a genuine appreciation for the finer points of baroque style. For example, a contrast in acting style is particularly important to works such as *Dido and Aeneas*, where the malevolent sorceress and her witches must distinguish themselves from the courtiers. As one of the 2009 singers explained, “one element I found interesting was [the] rigid angular gestures for the negative characters, the witches and Sorceress. They concentrated on wide eyes and mouths showing teeth and bent statures with feet planted firmly on the ground. Their fingers were wide-spread with large exaggerated movements. This showed a fantastic contrast to the delicate beautifully curved movements of the courtiers.”

Sometimes a learning journal captures the various stages of the cognitive apprenticeship. The learning journals of the singers reflect particularly on their work with Ian Caddy; they are usually experiencing their first operatic role and the stylised type of acting is completely unfamiliar to them. The response of one singer (Camilla, 2007) to a series of workshops (in that year, separated from each other by around two weeks) details their particular learning journey:

*Camilla, 1st response:* Ian Caddy workshop: “I remember thinking I was never going to remember so many gestures…I felt I had learned a huge amount in just one day.”

*Camilla, 2nd response:* Ian Caddy workshop: “The gestures didn’t come as naturally as I had hoped…but I gradually felt myself relaxing into them.”

*Camilla, 3rd response:* Ian Caddy workshop: “I realised I was no longer thinking about the gestures, but was doing them naturally.”

This student demonstrates “the qualitative and stable changes that occur in thinking over time and through experience” that is known as cognitive development (McAlpine 124). Initially overwhelmed, by the final workshop she was able to perform the gestures without relying on any particular support.
Conclusion

Working with a learner-orientated instructional model engages me more closely in the learning processes of my students and engages them more with what might otherwise be a very foreign subject matter: eighteenth-century opera. While it is still possible to detect varied levels of engagement and attainment, the quality of both has improved overall. The value of a learner-orientated instructional model (with an emphasis on offering students a cognitive apprenticeship) is particularly apparent in the learning outcomes. The model delivers a lot in a relatively short space of time. With my particular course, students are able to engage independently and very effectively with a range of research tools in order to appreciate the work they are about to perform, evaluate their roles, as well as identify and apply stylistically appropriate musical ornaments and physical gestures to their performance. They not only come to appreciate the artistic aesthetics of the particular period under study but even become advocates of authentic practice through their own direct engagement with it. Ian Caddy has repeatedly commented on the openness of my students to his teaching; I know of at least one who has passed on the skills she learned from him to her own pupils.

The emphasis on “practice” offers students a very intense and integrated experience. As one student observed:

Our two performances allowed us an opportunity to show what we have learnt in an historical aspect through performance…This…is much more beneficial…than a written exam…We have successfully been able to apply our own research and historical knowledge to this learning process. I have found this module extremely helpful, stimulating, and memorable. (Dido and Aeneas, 2009)

Students demonstrate a swiftly acquired authority in the summative pieces of assessment for this module. Some produce their best pieces of written work, others their best performance. In my opera module, a substantial majority of students (typically around 85%) earn marks higher than their degree average and several have achieved the best result of their entire degree.

But the legacy of their intensive learning experience extends beyond this. They retain the benefits, which then apply across other aspects of their lives. Colleagues have noted the increased poise and confidence of certain students in their final recitals. Those intending to become performers gain relevant experience, as do those (from a different perspective) who go on to teach. Thus, both the breadth and depth of the student learning experience benefits from the learner orientation of the instruction. And the eighteenth century comes alive for a new generation of learners.

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NOTES

1 This article originated in a poster session for ASECS Vancouver, “Teaching the Eighteenth Century,” which was convened by Diane Kelley. I am grateful to her for the opportunity to display my work, learn from colleagues, and also for her kind assistance in developing this article. My poster was organized under the following headings: “The Learning Journey,” “Workshop Experiences,” “Application of Research to Practice: Reading,” “Application of Research to Practice: Viewing,” “Teamwork – New Perspectives,” and “Ownership Facilitates Deep Engagement.” It featured excerpts of past students’ learning journals. I have integrated these and the accompanying illustrations into the present article. I would like to thank Craig Jackson and Dermot McBride for technical assistance with this project.

WORKS CITED


