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The Research Status of Music Composition in Australia

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Abstract

A brief consideration of a number of Doctor of Philosophy programs in music composition offered at Australian universities reveals differences in the research status of original musical compositions. A discussion introduces three principal criteria for music composition to qualify as research: (1) the investigative nature, (2) the systematic investigation, and (3) the original contribution to knowledge. The discussion concludes that PhD candidates should be able to address criteria one and two without major conceptual hurdles. The third criterion constitutes a challenge in terms of both the conceptualisation of aesthetic knowledge and a PhD candidate's capacity to create original music.

The research status of music composition can be seen in the context of a recent increase in the acceptance of non-text-based research outcomes, such as visual art exhibitions, live performances, and computer software. This acceptance, however, is by no means universal and is likely to remain contentious for some time to come, at least within the confines of traditional academia. With particular reference to music, the contention lies in the perception that the composition of musical works is primarily a creative activity, rather than an intellectual pursuit associated with research. Notwithstanding this contention, PhDs in music composition have been offered here in Australia and overseas for many years, and many well-established practitioners in the field of music composition conceive of their work as innovative and exploratory.

1. Brief consideration of Australian PhD programs in music composition

A distinction can be made between PhD programs that treat original musical works as research outcomes and PhD programs that require a substantial text-based thesis in addition to a folio of original compositions. A greater reliance on the assessment of a text-based component suggests that the research status of the submitted musical works themselves is somewhat downgraded, especially if the written component is referred to as a thesis or a dissertation while the composition folio is referred to as creative work. In contrast, the assessment requirement of a minor exegesis or a critical commentary that

serves to contextualise the folio of music compositions gives greater recognition to the research status of original musical works. In the latter case, the folio of compositions has the status of a thesis, and an original contribution to knowledge is made in the form of an aesthetic argument articulated in the musical works themselves. By drawing attention to this distinction, we also aim to identify those PhD programs in which original works indeed constitute the research outcome.

We begin with an appraisal of the so-called Group of Eight (Go8)—a coalition of Australia’s major universities comprising Adelaide University, the Australian National University, the University of Melbourne, Monash University, the University of New South Wales, the University of Queensland, the University of Sydney, and the University of Western Australia. Out of the Go8, six universities presently offer a PhD in the specialisation of music composition: Adelaide University, the Australian National University, the University of Melbourne, Monash University, the University of Queensland, and the University of Sydney.

At the Australian National University the PhD in Music can be undertaken in both music performance and music composition. Applicants “may propose a research project which is comprised of artistic work relevant to the field of study (for example through performance, appropriately documented, or a folio of creative work) and a written Dissertation.”¹ The University’s web page states that “a *thesis* in this context means, in addition to written material, performances, and audio and video recordings submitted by

the candidate for the purposes of examination.”² Thus, the requirements fall somewhere in between the two types of assessment requirements identified above. On the one hand, the written material is referred to as dissertation, on the other, performances and original music compositions are clearly identified as thesis components that are assessable as research outcomes.

Similarly, the University of Melbourne identifies two thesis components: creative work and a written dissertation. Interestingly, candidates are given a choice with regard to the relation between the written thesis and the folio of compositions: “For candidates enrolled in PhD Music Composition the written dissertation may either address an approved research topic independent of the creative work, or address the creative work itself, forming with the folio a complementary, mutually reinforcing part of a single project.”³ Thus, candidates opting for a research topic independent of the creative work would not be required to explain or contextualise their creative work.

At Monash University, the written component of the thesis requirements is not treated as a research paper in its own right. Instead, PhD candidates submit a critical commentary of between 20,000 and 25,000 words that serves to explain and contextualise the research-based folio of original compositions. An additional requirement of the degree is that 50 per cent of the music submitted in the folio must be presented in public concerts.⁴ The PhD program in composition at the University of Queensland was one of the models for the composition degree at Monash. Consequently, the requirements at the two

institutions are very similar. Like Monash University, the University of Queensland requires its candidates to submit a critical commentary rather than a dissertation.⁵

The web page of the Music Conservatorium at the University of Sydney states that the thesis requirements for the PhD “can be met by a portfolio of musical compositions where the thesis includes prefatory analytical notes for each composition.”⁶ As with the University of Queensland and Monash University, the emphasis is on the folio, while the written material constitutes only a minor thesis component.

The web page of Adelaide University did not provide any details about the PhD in music composition at the time of access.⁷ The University’s Academic Program Rules for the PhD state, however, that “in the case of a thesis submitted in the areas of artistic or visual practice, presentation may be in one of two forms, a) by a theoretical thesis or b) by one or more creative works and an exegesis.”⁸ A recent survey of Australian Tertiary Music Education in *Sounds Australian* mentions “the introduction of composition at PhD level” as a recent development at Adelaide University.⁹

Outside of the Go8 universities, support for the submission of research outcomes in the form of creative works, including musical compositions, is growing and, with particular reference to musical compositions, some of this support is occurring outside of what could traditionally be regarded as music departments or conservatoria. Of particular note are the Creative Industries Research and Applications Centre at Queensland University of

Technology, which encourages creative practice as research,¹⁰ and the RMIT's Media Arts department, which offers a PhD program "that investigates, analyses, and contributes original knowledge to contemporary artistic practice."¹¹

Overall, the microcosm of the Go8 seems consistent with the broader picture in that more than half of the music departments across the country support, in varying degrees, musical compositions as legitimate research outcomes for the fulfillment of requirements for a PhD. This situation, while encouraging, nevertheless highlights the fact that composition is still playing a somewhat secondary role in Australian academia to musicology and ethnomusicology, areas in which the existence of research degrees is taken for granted. That musical composition is in some respects the most abstract and elusive of these areas goes some way to explaining this situation, but there is no reason why all three areas, together with music performance, could not co-exist in an environment that pursues music research in all of its forms.

2. Discussion: three principal criteria for music composition to qualify as research

The second part of this article presents a series of arguments for music composition as a legitimate form of research. In particular, questions are raised as to what constitutes research in the case of music composition, and how, if at all, musical composition can contribute to knowledge. It is hoped that the presentation of these arguments will provide

support for already existing PhD programs in composition, as well as foster debate within those tertiary music departments that do not offer such a program. It is the opinion of the authors that the support for the current manifestations of musical composition, and sound art in general, is a vital component for any music department, school, or conservatorium that aims to operate at a level of international relevance.

In trying to navigate the friction between the treatment of music composition as a creative activity, on the one hand, and a form of research, on the other, a clear idea of what constitutes research is required. Research is generally understood to involve some form of systematic investigation that leads to new observations and therefore to new knowledge. Thus, for music composition to qualify as research, it would have to be (1) of an investigative nature, (2) the investigation would have to be systematic, and (3) the investigation would have to result in an original contribution to knowledge.

Clearly, not all music composition fulfils all three criteria. Some composers or sound artists may explore a particular musical aesthetic but don't do it systematically. Others may have a very systematic approach to composition but their music is not original. And others again may regard the creation of music primarily as a form of self-expression, without much concern for new ideas or new compositional approaches. While there is of course no imperative for composers to address any of these criteria, candidates in a composition PhD will have to consider them in order to lift their creative work to the level of research.

The first criterion regarding the investigative nature of compositional work should not pose a major hurdle because there is no shortage of ways to explore new sounds and new ways of organizing it. Orchestral composers may look at new combinations of instruments and new textures within a traditional performance context. A microtonal composer may explore new pitch structures. Studio-based composers and sound artists may investigate new technologies to create new sounds and new sound structures. A politically minded composer may wish to explore and assess the socio-political implications of new music and its performance. And others may research the interface between conventional music making and music technology through the composition of electro-acoustic works that employ both traditional performers and electronic media. Significantly, the identification of an investigative approach also helps to unify a candidate's composition folio. So rather than submitting a folio of loosely related compositions, a PhD candidate would have to develop all submitted works on the basis of a single research question.

A concrete example of an investigative approach in composition is the work of Steve Adam, a composer and sound designer presently enrolled in the composition PhD at Monash University. Adam's research investigates the possibility of computers gathering, analysing, and processing information about music performance. More specifically, his research deals with the creation and application of computing systems that analyse musical performance gestures and signals, and transform the received performance data

into musical output, such as computer-generated sounds and sound formations.¹² The development of cutting-edge music technology that forms an integral part of such a project is of course investigative by its very nature.

One may consider at this point that music composition can be brought into the proximity of research through the musical adaptation of research findings in fields other than music. Such an approach, however, does not of itself guarantee research-based composition. For example, the compositional use of complex sets of numbers can result in music that is based on research in mathematics, but composers who translate such numbers into sound may apply the findings of other researchers without necessarily conducting any research of their own. In contrast, a careful and systematic investigation of possible correspondences between sets of numbers and aesthetically successful sound structures would indeed qualify as research-based composition. The difference is subtle and lies primarily in the depth of the approach: a simplistic appropriation of scientific findings as a compositional model versus a reflective exploration of correspondences between musical and non-musical systems.

Also worth mentioning in this context is the so-called sonification in research fields other than music. Sonification is a process by which complex scientific data is converted into sound in order for researchers to aurally identify patterns that would be difficult or impossible to extract from complex numerical data or graphics based on such data. A recent example from La Trobe University is the sonification of data relating to the growth

of biological organisms, where the temporal unfolding of the resulting sound structure corresponds to the growth rates of microscopic organisms from which the data was derived.¹³ As one would expect, sonification may also render aesthetic outcomes in addition to its scientific applications, which composers may wish to adapt for their music. Again, the research status of such compositional work would very much depend on the depth of approach.

Addressing the second criterion mentioned above, once a research question has been sufficiently defined, composers and sound artists will have to adopt or develop a suitable research method in order to conduct their research systematically. Generally speaking, in music composition the method is compositional technique. In Adam's case, the compositional technique used to generate work will be closely linked to the way in which the computer is set up to respond to in-coming sound. In other words, Adam's development and configuration of a specific computer system will not only impact on, but will largely constitute his compositional technique.

In more traditional approaches to music composition one encounters the use of existing techniques, rather than the development of new ones. This should be as unproblematic as the application of existing research methods in other disciplines, provided the candidate is able to modify existing techniques in such a way that their adaptation renders original musical results. Candidates should be aware that the creation of groundbreaking works in music composition has always gone hand in hand with either the introduction of new

compositional technique or the significant extension of traditional technique.

As a sideline, a comparison can be drawn between the first two criteria discussed here and experimental music making. Experimental music can be regarded as an exploratory activity undertaken to test the validity and explore the parameters of processes, situations and ideas that, in themselves, pose questions about established and accepted musical contexts. The key term in this particular definition is *process*. The implication is that the object of art or the compositional outcome is not the primary focus of the investigation or experiment. The focus is on the process or, in more formal terms, the systematic approach. This focus constitutes an overlap between experimental music making and research-based composition. An important difference remains, though, between this specific understanding of experimental music and research-based composition. While experimental music making may focus primarily on process without an explicit need to assess the musical outcome, research-based composition has to result in works that make an original contribution to knowledge.

The original contribution to knowledge is our third criterion for research-based composition, and it is more complex than both the research question and the research method. Traditionally, the Doctor of Philosophy is awarded when a candidate has made an original contribution to knowledge. This is what examiners would usually be asked to look for. Before we consider how this can be achieved through a folio of musical works, it is worth noting that some Australian universities, at least on their web pages, avoid the

issue of knowledge in the case of non-text-based thesis formats altogether. In some PhD programs candidates are expected to make a significant contribution to culture, in others they are asked to make a significant contribution to their field.

The choice of the word *culture*, and to a lesser extent the choice of the word *field*, is again reflective of a certain unease regarding the equation of knowledge with creative work. A similar unease is reflected in the idea that creative work is a research equivalent, rather than a form of proper research in its own right. The avoidance of the notion of knowledge in such a context becomes highly problematic, however, if one wants to preserve the original contribution to knowledge as the basic premise of the PhD. Rather than abandoning this premise, and thereby watering down the status of the PhD, it would be simpler and maybe more honest for some universities to deal with their apparent unease by offering a professional doctorate instead of a PhD. In a professional doctorate, the candidate would make a contribution to the specific field and not to knowledge in general.

A more complicated but also more rewarding way of addressing the issue of original knowledge is to assess the concept of knowledge in relation to musical works. When information is conveyed through the written or spoken word, the acceptance of such information as a form of knowledge can be more or less taken for granted. In contrast, information that is conveyed through the sound of a musical work is usually not associated with knowledge, or at least the word *knowledge* does not readily come to mind when one listens to music. Yet, most people would agree that music does convey

aesthetic information related to such things as form, rhythm, sound color, movement, repetition, variation, contrast, to mention only a few. Such information constitutes aesthetic knowledge, that is, a form of knowledge that is related to the perception, cognition, and appreciation of beauty in its broadest sense.

Beauty itself, however, cannot act as indicator of originality. Works in a composition folio not only have to be aesthetically convincing (whatever the particular aesthetic may be in each individual case), their particular aesthetic has to be distinctive in order to make an original contribution. It follows that examiners will have to be able to assess the level of originality in the submitted works, and this is no different from other fields of study where one would expect an examiner to know what research has already been undertaken and what research is indeed original. An examiner in music composition would have to be sufficiently aware of the repertoire to assess the originality of a composition folio.

An apparent difficulty associated with aesthetic knowledge is its non-verbal nature. While some of music's aesthetic information can be described in words, a considerable part of it remains untranslatable. Music, and more specifically music composition, promotes abstract thinking because in its purest form, when it is concerned with sound and sound structures, it does not engage in representation. Sounds have the freedom to act as self-referring signs. And as every musician knows, a verbal description of a particular sound, let alone a complete work, can only ever approach the listening experience, but it will not fully capture it. Similarly, two examiners may agree that a particular sound event in a

musical work stands out as being prominent and distinctive, but their verbal descriptions of this sound are almost certain to differ. This variance of expression in the examiners' reports, however, applies equally to examinations in other fields of research. In the end, the quality of the examination process in any field of study is largely determined by a careful appointment of experienced examiners. The non-verbal nature of aesthetic knowledge should therefore not impede the examination of original musical works.

Our emphasis on aesthetic knowledge is not meant to negate other forms of knowledge associated with, or maybe even contained in, music. Continuing debate about meaning in music, music's emotional content, and music's semiotic properties suggests that there is more to music than sound and sound structure, and this debate may well inform a composer's investigation. The point about aesthetic knowledge, however, is that sound constellations are readily available to perception and cognition, regardless of the additional associative or representational meaning they may carry. Thus, at its most fundamental level music is made up of sound, and ideally it should be possible for examiners to assess the originality of a musical work at this non-associative and pre-semiotic level.

This concludes our introduction and discussion of principal criteria of research-based music composition. While we do not suggest that this article has solved all the problems associated with research in music composition, it should have become clear that criteria one and two—the investigative nature and the systematic approach—can be addressed without major conceptual hurdles under the guidance of a competent supervisor. The

third criterion—the original contribution to knowledge—remains, and maybe should remain, a challenge in terms of both the conceptualisation of aesthetic knowledge and a candidate’s capacity to create truly original music.

¹ *The Australian National University*, Graduate Studies in Music, 6 January 2004
<<http://www.anu.edu.au/graduate/programs/m3/PhD.php>>

² *The Australian National University*, Grad Stud. Mus.

³ *The University of Melbourne*, PhD Handbook, 6 January 2004
<http://www.gradstudies.unimelb.edu.au/pgstudy/phd/handbk/hdbk_g.html#format>

⁴ *Monash University*, Doctor of Philosophy (Music Composition), 6 January 2004
<<http://www.monash.edu.au/pubs/handbooks/postgrad/pg0075.htm>>

⁵ *The University of Queensland*, School of Music, 6 January 2004
<http://www.uq.edu.au/Music/html/web_graduate.HTM>

⁶ *The University of Sydney*, Sydney Conservatorium of Music, 6 January 2004
<http://www.usyd.edu.au/su/conmusic/depts_t.html>

⁷ *The University of Adelaide*, Elder School of Music, 6 January 2004
<<http://www.music.adelaide.edu.au/>>

⁸ *The University of Adelaide*, Adelaide Graduate Centre, 6 January 2004
<<http://www.adelaide.edu.au/calendar/pg/agc>>

⁹ Raffæle Marcellino, “Australian Tertiary Music Education,” *Sounds Australian* 60 (2002): 36.

¹⁰ Queensland University of Technology, Research Programs, 6 January 2004
<<http://www.creativeindustries.qut.com/studyopt/honours/research.jsp>>

¹¹ RMIT University, Postgraduate Study Media Arts, 6 January 2004
<http://media-arts.rmit.edu.au/Les_Walking/pg.research.html>

¹² Steve Adam, "Control and Mapping Strategies for *Hybrid*," *Proceedings of the Australasian Computer Music Conference, Melbourne July 6 – 8, 2002* (Fitzroy, Australia: Australasian Computer Music Association, 2002): 1 – 5.

¹³ Jacques and Fran Soddell, *microbes, L-systems and music*, 6 January 2004
<<http://ironbark.bendigo.latrobe.edu.au/~soddell/lsys/>>

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