Music departments should resist the siren song of pop schools

There is an important place for such training, but it is markedly at odds with many of the established values of the university, says Ian Pace

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The foundation of the Paris Conservatoire in 1795 is often viewed by historians of music education as a watershed. The institution's shift away from a broad and rounded musical education to more focused professional instrumental and vocal training for professionals informed the growth of the modern conservatoire in the 19th century, including in the UK.

Music as a UK undergraduate academic degree, however, is primarily a post-1945 development. Practical music-making was part of it from the outset, via keyboard harmony, aural and singing skills, composition and some history and theory. But the aim was often to train the likes of music teachers and choral directors rather than aspiring professional musicians, who preferred conservatoires.

From the 1970s, new university departments were created with different focuses, including the scholarly study of contemporary Western, popular, electronic and non-Western musics, or with new emphases on theory, history and context. At the same time, reflecting developments abroad and, no doubt, the introduction of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), music scholars moved from earlier production of new editions or monographs for a general audience towards more rigorous writing and research grounded in the values of the humanities. With hindsight, this looks like a golden age.

Since the 1990s, with the advent of the "new musicology" and the growth of other fields, such as popular music, cultural studies and new variants of ethnomusicology, music study has tended to move further away from the consideration of music as an aural phenomenon, whose meanings can be elusive and can adapt to changing contexts.

As in other artistic fields, the modest but realisable aim of producing rigorous studies of musical, literary, cinematic or other texts – or their relationship to historical context – is often viewed as trivial compared with making major pronouncements on society, culture, globalisation, colonialism and more. Those claiming to be doing the latter often offer harsh verdicts on those doing the former.

But the chances of academic writings of this type from the arts having any significant social impact are extremely low, and this has contributed to the increasing bifurcation of scholarly and practical study. So, too, have the 1992 Further and Higher Education

Act, the introduction of tuition fees and other moves towards greater marketisation. In such an environment, a range of post-1992 institutions introduced vocationally oriented degrees in music technology and commercial music performance, which would not always have previously been classified as degrees.

Furthermore, the progressive marginalisation of the study of music theory and analysis, relentlessly dismissed as "formalism", deprive music departments of the one thing, other than practical work, that is not undertaken (often more rigorously) by other disciplines.

Meanwhile, conservatoires moved from non-graduate performance courses and graduate diplomas towards full degrees, though usually still with a practical focus. Revised guidelines to the RAE/REF allowed for practice-based submissions, facilitating the integration of certain types of practitioners into full academic jobs without necessarily requiring much investment in wider academic values.

In other words, the boundaries between practice and scholarship have become blurred. Some university degrees are now akin to those at conservatoires but with much less exacting audition requirements, while some writings by practitioners are focused more on promotion of their work and a singular narrative around their intentions than more wide-ranging critical and cultural investigation.

This primarily British development brings some advantages, but the position of scholarly study of music at tertiary level has become critical. For instance, institutions, including some in the Russell Group, are continually modifying skills prerequisites and curricular content to recruit students who often have little or no knowledge of notation or theory (reflecting declining provision of music at state schools). Outside the Russell Group, numbers on plain "music" degrees (as opposed to "music technology", "commercial music" and the like) have declined sharply in the last decade, and now account for fewer than 20 per cent of students. Job opportunities for musicologists – and, thus, research – have also declined, and some institutions' teaching relies heavily on casualised or hourly-paid staff rather than research-active academics.

It is certainly possible to teach vocational music degrees in a critical and scholarly manner, considering the history and social meanings of technology, philosophies of performance and the like. Excellent scholarship of this type is done in other types of departments, but in music more common are modules such as "getting ahead in the industry", offering little wider holistic study or transferable skills. This is all the more unfortunate given the inadequate number of regular and properly paid work in very competitive vocational fields. The many who graduate without grounding in notation, theory or history will struggle to teach the national school curriculum, too.

School cuts also mean many would-be students have had minimal exposure to non-commercial music. A more idealist concept of university music education would attempt to remedy that lack, but the millennium-long Western classical tradition, preserved through notation, is not always a primary concern even on some pure "music" courses. It is constantly attacked for being elitist, insufficiently contemporary and commercial, and too "white" or "colonial". As such, it has been jettisoned at

some once highly-respected departments, such as Keele, most of whose distinguished scholars have left.

A further challenge is brought by the growth of a small number of for-profit providers, such as the British and Irish Modern Music Institute (BIMM) or the Academy of Contemporary Music (ACM). A 2018 report by the Quality Assurance Agency found that BIMM had few scholars with higher degrees and little research culture (though the QAA added that the institution was "taking steps to address the position" and awarded it taught degree-awarding powers). It also found that BIMM had "quite a high proportion" of fractional or hourly-paid staff.

Such for-profits often go even further than many post-92s in the direction of pop schools, recruiting students sometimes with minimal academic qualifications (various performance courses at BIMM, for instance, only require two E grades at A-Level). There is an important place for such training, but it is markedly at odds with many the established values of the university, and this model should be approached with caution.

Music courses, like those in other "creative arts" subjects, will no doubt continue to come under scrutiny in the "low value" degrees debate given their relatively low average earnings potential. But there are certainly scholarly and humanities-based music courses whose graduates who have flourished in many high-skilled occupations. It is important that this fact is not lost through conflation of degrees of very different kinds, with very different outcomes.

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