

## **DEVELOPING NOTATION, CHART READING AND LARGE ENSEMBLE PERFORMANCE SKILLS IN CONTEMPORARY MUSIC STUDENTS THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION**

**Annie K. MITCHELL**

*Southern Cross University, Australia  
e-mail: annie.mitchell@scu.edu.au*

### **Abstract**

*This paper discusses successful pedagogical strategies, music arranging and ensemble techniques used to teach music notation, chart reading and ensemble performance in Southern Cross University's (SCU) Contemporary Music degree. The profile of enrolled students is increasingly guitarists and singers from a popular music background, with limited traditional music education, poor music reading skills and little experience of playing from notated charts in ensembles. However, many of these students are training for careers as secondary school music teachers, a vocation requiring practical skills of playing in and directing various school music ensembles: choir, contemporary bands, big band, school orchestra and musical theatre show band. School music teachers also have to teach composition and arranging and apply these skills when preparing repertoire and resources. Other university students pursuing a portfolio career of musician and composer similarly require performance, reading, composition, and arranging and ensemble skills. Because of the predominant numbers of guitarists and vocal students, large ensembles at SCU have an imbalance of these instruments over keyboards, bass, drums and horns. This paper discusses teaching and learning approaches used to overcome this imbalance by extending the roles and musical function of each instrument, enabling all players to contribute meaningfully to the large ensemble learning environment. The pedagogical challenge was*

- *to provide contemporary repertoire to develop notation and chart reading skills in popular musicians;*
- *to arrange repertoire to broaden the ensemble roles of guitarists and singers in large ensembles;*
- *to train students in directing and performing in large ensembles;*
- *to nurture these professional skills in pre-service teachers and musicians entering the contemporary music industry.*

*Developing notation, chart reading and large ensemble performance skills has significant applications for higher music education, pedagogy, and music industry practice, namely*

- *teaching pre-service teachers vocational arranging and ensemble direction skills required for school music teaching, choral and band direction;*
- *providing professional development for popular musicians needing to improve their performance, ensemble and musical direction skills and broaden the musical genres they play in;*
- *motivating teachers to compose original educational resources;*
- *applying arranging skills in professional music practice to create repertoire for professional ensembles;*
- *contributing to music scholarship and research by interrogating and sharing teaching practices, performance training, resource creation, and overcoming challenges in music higher education.*

*The ethos of professional development, creativity, originality and adaptation that underpins this pedagogy are all relevant themes of the 11<sup>th</sup> International Scientific Conference “Problems in Music Pedagogy”.*

**Key Words:** *music notation, pedagogy, contemporary music, teaching strategies, large ensemble performance*

## **Introduction**

Over my two decades’ tenure lecturing in Australia’s Southern Cross University’s (SCU) Bachelor of Contemporary Music (BCM) degree, which is situated within the School of Arts and Social Sciences (SASS), the student cohort has changed significantly. From the balanced collection of keyboard, guitar, bass, drum and vocal students plus a few brass and woodwind players that prevailed for the first decade of my tenure, this workable student demographic has increasingly been replaced by a cohort of guitarists and singers from popular music backgrounds, with limited traditional music education, poor music reading skills and little experience of playing from written music and notated charts. However, many of these students are training for careers as secondary school music teachers, a vocation requiring practical skills of playing in and directing various school music ensembles: choir, contemporary bands, big band, school orchestra and musical theatre show band. School music teachers also have to teach composition and arranging in a variety of genres from classical to contemporary, and apply these skills when preparing repertoire and resources. Students pursuing a portfolio career of musician and composer similarly require performance, reading, composition, arranging and ensemble skills.

## **Aim of the Research**

This paper *Developing notation, chart reading and large ensemble performance skills in contemporary music students through higher education* aims to expose and examine pedagogical strategies, musical arranging and ensemble techniques I have found successful in teaching music notation, chart reading and ensemble performance in SCU’s BCM degree. A parallel stream of instrumental studies and ensemble group work classes run through the performance strand of the BCM, a scaffolded, developmental program extending the three years this degree is offered. Large ensemble group classes are mandatory for the first two years, students taking either guitar ensemble or Choir, with some participating in both ensembles. A broad pedagogical aim is to enable all players to contribute meaningfully to the large and small ensemble learning

environments. The paper also aims to illuminate the impact these pedagogical techniques and the associated teaching resources I have created may have on practical music education at tertiary and secondary levels in Australia experiencing similar demographical change.

## **Object of the Research**

The pedagogical challenge was to

- provide contemporary repertoire to develop notation and chart reading skills in popular musicians;
- arrange and adapt repertoire to broaden the ensemble roles of all students, particularly guitarists and singers in large ensembles;
- train students in performing in, directing and conducting musical ensembles;
- nurture these vocational skills in pre-service teachers and musicians entering the contemporary music industry and teaching profession.

Teaching and learning approaches used to address the emerging student profile and the limited available instruments to work with include extending the roles and musical function of each existing instrument or section. An example of this strategy is transcribing horn section parts of a big band piece for three guitars, where the rhythm of melodic lines is generally complementary but the melody is harmonised, giving each part some independence but the section general rhythmic homogeneity. Further techniques are composing and arranging pieces specifically for the available ensembles, and adapting existing charts to suit each individual ensemble. All students are encouraged to extend their role in ensemble by playing a secondary instrument e.g. percussion, singing harmonies, and playing lines on keyboard to emulate horn or string parts. Integrated into this scaffolded learning program was the objective of training students in these adaptive creative musical techniques, building their independence, musical leadership and facilitation skills; enabling them to employ this pedagogy in their future teaching and musical direction roles.

## **Methodology: Description of research and practice**

Over the past seven years, qualitative methods have been employed to undertake this research, based on a practice-led research approach *“concerned with the nature of practice and lead[ing] to new knowledge that has operational significance for that practice”* (Candy, 2006, 1). During this time, interrogation of my own pedagogy has constantly occurred, through my roles as teacher (participant) and researcher (observer). Each semester, creative outputs have resulted from this project, namely musical compositions, choral and ensemble arrangements which are then used as teaching resources and their effectiveness investigated. This approach aligns with practice-based research: *“...an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice”* (Candy, 2006, 1). Student focus groups were conducted in 2016 and 2017, specifically to discuss ensemble teaching and performance.

The qualitative data collected by the instruments mentioned above has been consistently verified by quantitative statistical evidence. Formal student feedback on

all SCU subjects and their teaching is collected anonymously by the university after the delivery of every subject. Each subject in this study is offered once a year. The data collection instrument gathers statistical and written feedback, which is then independently analysed. Ratings over this seven-year period average 4.39/5 unit (subject) satisfaction for the musicianship and ensemble subjects I teach, and 4.65/5 for my teaching. The success of my teaching strategies is verified by SASS Head of School Professor Barbara Rugendyke:

*“Formal evaluations of Annie’s teaching are extensive, statistically valid and consistently excellent... In 35 years as an educator I have rarely encountered such compelling evidence of high quality teaching as the result of conscious professional refinement” (2016).*

The previous SASS Head of School also attests to the success of my curriculum development and pedagogy:

*“The quality of her teaching is demonstrable in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Music students are often enthusiastic about the practice of music, but markedly less so about theory; the consistently high ratings Annie has received in her theory classes need to be read in this light” (Professor Mike Evans, former SASS Head of School, 2012).*

Informal student feedback, communicated regularly each semester, further supports this data:

*“The teaching of this unit was beyond excellent. Formerly I was dull in the knowledge of theory but now I have a deep understanding of what has been taught in this unit which will now lead me to further advancement in subsequent units. This unit was the most dense of all the units I have completed so far. The content was complex and vast. Annie is an amazing teacher: I have learned a great deal and greatly enjoyed it” (Contemporary Music Theory II student, 2014).*

Regarding the BCM subjects where I teach music notation, *chart reading and ensemble performance*, university statistics over the past three years reveal that 91.56% of all students enrolled have passed these subjects, with an average of 19.3% of students receiving High Distinction or Distinction (the two highest grades).

As BCM graduates obtain employment as professional musicians and music teachers, data collected about their pedagogy (modelled on my methods) also informs this research.

*"I have been very fortunate to have enjoyed a great career in music education since leaving SCU. I would like to offer my thanks and respect to you for the impact and influence you had on my music teaching philosophy and practice, particularly in relation to the rigour you brought to the teaching of aural skills in musicianship. I have employed these techniques in my own teaching practice to great effect since" (Andy Mison, Principal, Northern Territory School of Music, 2016).*

Schools where BCM pre-service teachers undertake practicum and where beginning teachers recently graduated from the BCM are employed have reported significant improvements in the standard of musical literacy of these young teachers.

### **Pedagogical Model**

Fundamental pedagogical concepts are embedded in my Model (see Figure 1), which addresses key learning areas in music: theory, aural musicianship, composition, performance and ensemble; and graduate attributes including lifelong and self-directed learning, and professional practice. Strengths of this curriculum include foundational skills learning music notation, basic scales, chords and rhythms (Year 1); advanced and applied harmonic and rhythmic vocabulary (Year 2); composition and performance in specialised genres (Year 3); creative/exegetical Honours projects or final education year (Year 4).

My pedagogy and curriculum design have been triangulated against the spiral curriculum models of Bruner (1960, 1996), Harden and Stamper (1999); Efland's (1995) lattice curriculum, and Kolb and Kolb's (2005) experiential learning theory. The learning journey is built on foundations of music theory, musicianship and creative/instrumental practice, curriculum design is hierarchical and developmental (Bruner, 1960, 1996), with recurrent engagement in content (Bruner, 1960, 1996), presented through a comprehensible structure and sequence of content (Curzon & Tummons, 2013). Advanced knowledge of these subjects, gained through the application of musical concepts via diverse learning approaches, resulting in expertise in the knowledge domain (Efland, 1995) creates a lattice that upholds these steps in musical education. The higher levels of the model below depict active engagement in creative professional and/or academic environments which can facilitate graduates' holistic adaptation to the world and where knowledge is created by transformation (Kolb & Kolb, 2005), often through self-directed and lifelong learning, work and community engagement.



Figure 1. A 21<sup>st</sup> century curriculum model for music higher education  
(Photo: Tree Stairs, 2014)

## Results of the Research

### *A. Musical examples: Developing music notation and chart reading skills through ensemble performance*

My third-year large instrumental ensemble class this year had a proliferation of guitarists, plus bass and keyboard players, drummers and male and female vocalists. As one of the common ensemble groups found in high school and in the music industry is big band, I included big band repertoire in this class. I adapted the score of Birdland (Zawinal, 1977) from an arrangement for full big band of brass (3 trumpets, 3 trombones), saxophone section (2 altos, 2 tenors and 1 baritone), piano, rhythm guitar, bass and drums. The arranging techniques I used were to divide the original sax and horn section parts among the guitarists. Selecting parts that were most varied, avoiding duplication of parts that were very similar. Thus, Guitar 1 played Soprano Sax line, Guitar 2 played Alto Sax, Guitar 3 played Trumpet 1, Guitar 4 played Trumpet 2 and Guitar 5 played Trumpet 3 part. I also created a rhythm guitar chart for very poor

readers. The guitarists were encouraged to take turns playing solos, motivating them to demonstrate their improvising skills.

55

Sop. Sax.

Alto Sax.

Ten. Sax.

Tpt. 1

Tpt. 2

Tpt. 3

Voice

...came too. There down in Bird land. Bas... ie blew Blak... ey too. Where?...

**Figure 2. "Birdland" excerpt**

The pedagogical success of this approach for ensemble teaching was apparent. Students initially rehearsed in sections, learning to play unison lines or harmony lines in rhythmic unison. Some melodic independence of the parts allowed individuality for each student. Teamwork was enhanced by learning the importance of blending (timbrally and rhythmically) within a section. Singers were required to read from a written chart and follow a score rather than relying on lyric sheets. The angular and syncopated nuances of the jazz vocal lines in this arrangement improved their sight singing.

Advanced musical concepts were taught and applied in this learning activity. All students were trained in the importance of navigating the form as per the written arrangement. All students (including singers) learned the application of scales and modes for creating improvised solos. Rhythmic concepts included syncopation, rhythmic stabs, and doubling on percussion instruments. Harmonic concepts included advanced harmonic vocabulary, jazz chords, extended and dissonant chords, piano and guitar chord voicings, the effective use of dissonance, and parallel chromatic runs. Interpretative considerations included playing with dynamics, expressive nuances and

specific instrumental articulations, timbral blends and sectional sounds, and one's individual contribution to the whole ensemble.

The other large ensemble group I teach is the Southern Cross University Choir. The choir comprises first and second year students who study this ensemble as part of core subjects, plus any other students enrolled in the BCM who voluntarily attend. The choir is for Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass parts (SATB) which are fairly evenly represented in the ensemble. This semester I composed a medley of three Latin songs for SATB: *Shaker Song* (Beckensstein, Lasley & Willis, 1977), *Sausalito* (Duke, 2005) and *Rio de Janeiro Blue* (Haeny & Torrance, 1977). I composed these arrangements from a *New Real Book* (1988) vocal and chord chart of *Shaker Song* and my own transcribed charts of *Sausalito* and *Rio de Janeiro Blue*. This type of repertoire is not readily available for choirs, so I compose my own arrangements; endeavouring to broaden the repertoire knowledge of students and educate them in various musical styles and genres.

The image shows a musical score for a SATB choir. It consists of two systems of staves, labeled 83 and 87. Each system has four staves for Soprano (S.), Alto (A.), Tenor (T.), and Bass (B.). The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The first system (measures 83-86) has the lyrics: "And I get a feel - ing that I've seen the last of you". The second system (measures 87-90) has the lyrics: "Ri - o de Jan - ei - ro Blue Blue Ooh ooh". Chord symbols are written above the staves: D#m7(b5), G#7(#9), G#7(b9), C#m9, F#13, D#m7(b5), D9, C#m9, F#13, and F#/G#.

Figure 3. *Rio de Janeiro Blue* SATB choral excerpt

The rhythmic concepts taught and applied in this arrangement include Latin rhythms, particularly the performance of samba and bossa nova dance rhythms, accents and syncopation. Students also learn accompanying techniques, such as piano chord voicings, piano rhythmic patterns, Latin bass lines and drum and percussion grooves. This medley also contains advanced harmonic vocabulary, extended chords, tritone substitutions and dissonance, which singers must learn to pitch in harmony with accurate intonation and punctuate in punch chord riffs. Again, students learn to navigate arrangements with extended forms, read notation correctly, interpret dynamics, and scat sing angular melodic lines. The different roles of individuals and vocal sections within the choir, and their contribution to the whole ensemble, are emphasised by antiphony (call and response) and the texture and harmony created by moving line progressions.

### ***B. Problems in music pedagogy and examples of good practice***

Several problems are common when trying to develop notation, chart reading and ensemble skills in musicians, often regardless of their age. These are summarized here with some suggested solutions:

1. Students who are not good readers (many contemporary/popular musicians) avoid being heard, when placed in a position where their note-reading ability is exposed. Avoidance tactics include not playing or singing, or playing/singing so softly that it is inaudible. Sectional rehearsals are a good preparation to build reading confidence, where students can practise their parts in a smaller and hopefully supportive group, before participating in the full ensemble. The teacher or ensemble director must monitor the volume output of each instrument to ensure no students' playing is being deliberately hidden.
2. Conversely, classical musicians often read music adeptly but have little rhythmic feel, particularly when interpreting contemporary and jazz genres. Because they are good readers, some will plough through the arrangement but without listening to the ensemble. Technology is a very useful teaching and practice resource in this situation. Playing in grooves can be improved by facilitating rehearsals with sequenced tracks, drum machines, and at least a metronome. Encouraging students to practise with drum machines and playing along with recordings will not only improve their time keeping, but experimenting by playing different grooves should build more authentic 'rhythmic feel' in their playing which can be applied to ensemble performance.
3. Soloing needs to be taught as well as discovered through one's individual practice. Application of scales, modes and arpeggios over chord progressions is a craft to be learned, as is the architectural skill of constructing solos effectively over chord progressions and song structures. Teachers may set up small groups, allocating different roles for each student. For example, three keyboard players may individually play the chords/rhythm part, the bass line and another improvise over the chord changes; then swap parts. This technique is effective in small guitar groups. Single-note instruments can practise improvisation to pre-recorded rhythm section grooves or rehearse with a live rhythm section.

4. The ability to accompany vocalists and melody-line players empathetically, stylistically and supportively is a technique that often needs nurturing in ensemble players. This concept can be especially challenging when instruments change role from lead and/or improvisation to backing another instrument. As above, practising in small groups, alternating the roles and ensemble function each instrument performs can develop students' facility to move effectively between musical parts. Teachers can reinforce students' appreciation of the different textural roles by training students in aural perception; making them listen to, and identify or notate, the various techniques specific instruments use in melodic, harmonic and rhythmic roles.
5. The tonal balance of the ensemble timbre and volume needs to be checked and maintained, so that the sound levels don't keep increasing as the rehearsal/performance progresses. Timbral balance and ensemble volume should also be receptive to the repertoire. Again, the teacher or ensemble director should exercise leadership in this situation, but they should also delegate by instilling a strong sense of responsibility in each band member for their individual contribution to the collection rehearsal sound.

### ***C. Relevance and applications: Notation, chart reading and ensemble skills for the musical world***

#### *Community engagement*

Developing notation, chart reading and large ensemble skills has significant applications for higher music education, pedagogy, music industry, professional practice and community-engaged musical activities. Mentoring students (when they are ready) to play in available ensembles, such as orchestras, big bands, music theatre shows and their own bands, is a very positive and effective way to build their performance skills, music reading and interpretation, and ensemble etiquette. The Lismore Symphony Orchestra (LSO) in which I play double bass, is a local community orchestra in partnership with SCU; with the university providing the rehearsal and concert venues. Its present conductor is a former SCU Contemporary Music student. He also plays brass in the Northern Rivers Big Band, an ensemble that I played piano in for several years. One of our graduates plays piano and percussion with the LSO. Other interested students are invited to attend concerts as ushers, and encouraged to aim to join the orchestra when their performance and reading skills are of sufficient standard. Sound production students gain valuable work experience by volunteering as stage crew, lighting personnel or audio engineers.

#### *Teachers creating original resources*

One of my PhD students who graduated from SCU's Bachelor of Contemporary Music/Bachelor of Education (Secondary) degree about 10 years ago is employed as music teacher and choral director in the Northern Territory Music School. She conducts and directs choirs in Darwin and supervises the choral program throughout Northern Territory schools. This teacher is half-way through her Doctorate, a creative work/exegesis project composing 12 original choral pieces for 4-part female choir, specifically written for adolescent girls experiencing different stages of voice change.

The choral works are unique in addressing the physical challenges faced by female adolescent singers, a neglected area of choral pedagogy and resourcing. The pieces feature local languages and dialects to reflect the vast linguistic diversity of the choral cohort, many for whom English is a 3<sup>rd</sup> or more remote language. Her lyrics narrate the history, geography and culture of the Northern Territory and its peoples. The songs align with the Australian music school curriculum, and are accompanied by a kit of teaching lesson plans and resources to assist music teachers in the remote areas of the Northern Territory, most of whom are not musically trained or able to read music.

In a similar project, next year I have been granted 6 months' Special Studies Leave to undertake a project entitled "*Equitable representation of female musicians, composers and academics in Australian contemporary music and higher education*". This creative work/research project aims to elevate the contribution of female musicians and composers to Australia's contemporary music industry and higher music education. Creative outcomes will comprise seven original compositions for publication, to be made available for performance by professional and community choirs, ensembles and orchestras; and as performance and teaching resources for music higher education providers. The original works will include compositions for large contemporary ensembles, orchestra, duet of double bass and piano, big band, and SATB choir. Scholarly outcomes will be researched by analysing this repertoire; interrogating my creative process and evaluating the pedagogical value of these resources after trialling them on various ensembles.

From 2020, SCU's Contemporary Music Program will be in partnership with a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college on the Gold Coast. This facility will offer our BCM music course from an interstate campus. An upcoming task involves training their staff to successfully deliver our subjects with appropriate pedagogical strategies, resources, lesson plans and repertoire. The teaching resources I create and the music I compose and arrange are specifically designed to suit and improve our student levels of skill and musicianship, include original Australian repertoire (including my own) and be adaptable to the different instruments the students play.

## **Conclusion**

Several themes underpin my teaching philosophy, pedagogy and the ethos that I strive to nurture in students and colleagues:

- *musical literacy*, the ability to play, compose, interpret and understand music in various genres;
- *adaptability*, composing, arranging and adapting music for particular cohorts and available instruments;
- *originality* to create and arrange music to embrace the complexities and diversities of various learning environments;
- *professional development* to upskill musicians through many stages of lifelong learning and creative practice; and
- *resilience* to maintain one's own practice, teaching and creative self-belief.

## References

- Beckenstein, J., Lasley, D. & Willis, A. (1977). Shaker Song. In *The New Real Book* (1988) (pp. 315-316). Petaluma, CA: Sher Music Co.
- Bruner, J. (1960). *The Process of Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J. (1996). *The Culture of Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Candy, L. *Practice Based Research: A guide*. Retrieved 26<sup>th</sup> September, 2017 from <https://www.creativityandcognition.com/resources/PBR%20Guide-1.1-2006.pdf>
- Curzon, L.B. & Tummons, J. (2013). *Teaching in Further Education: An outline of principles and practice* (7<sup>th</sup> ed.). London: Bloomsbury.
- Duke, G. (2005). Sausalito. On *Duke* (CD recording). BPM Records.
- Efland, A.D. (1995). The spiral and the lattice: Changes in cognitive learning theory with implications for art education. *Studies in Art Education*, 36(3), 134-153.
- Haeny, J. & Torrance, R. (1977). Rio de Janeiro Blue. On Randy Crawford (1981) *Secret Combination* (CD Recording). Warner Bros. Records.
- Harden, R.M. & Stamper, N. (1999). What is a spiral curriculum? *Medical Teacher*, 2(2), 141-143.
- Kolb, A.Y. & Kolb, D.A. (2005). Learning styles and learning spaces: Enhancing experiential learning in higher education. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 4(2), 193-212.
- Tree Stairs* (2014). Retrieved 26<sup>th</sup> September, 2017 from <https://www.boredpanda.com/modern-stair-design/>
- Zawinal, J. (1977). *Birdland*. Arr. Michael Sweeney. (1990). Mulatto Music.

Received 19.10.2019

Accepted 16.12.2019