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From the practice room to the concert venue

A preliminary study

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PERFORMING SPACE

Music students need many hours of practice time in order to develop the ability to perform, forging their stage presence and fine motor skills, and refining their interpretation of repertoire. They can spend up to forty hours a week practicing in a variety of environments from their own homes to dedicated practice rooms (Jørgensen, 2004). A long-standing problem is that they are often unable to find an ideal location to practice. They are frequently forced to practice in small rooms with shallow ambiances, inappropriate acoustics, and in isolation despite the fact that as professionals they will be required to perform in concert venues with large audiences. The discrepancy between practice and performance settings is an area of concern for music education research (Williamon, Aufegger & Eiholzer, 2014).

Studies on music performance anxiety and venue acoustics have identified elements of the performance context and physical environment relevant for the musical outcome. This research establishes the premise that context does impact on both the performance itself and a musician's experience of that performance. The presence of an audience and the performance modality (solo vs. ensemble) have been found to significantly influence feelings of stage anxiety (Sârbescu & Dorgo, 2014); while research on acoustics (Baumann, 2011; Schärer Kalkandjiev & Weinzierl, 2013; Ueno, Kato, & Kawai, 2010) showed that musicians respond to different acoustic properties like reverberation level, flexibly adapting parameters such as tempo and use of vibrato (Ueno et al., 2010). This research together suggests that a discrepant practice environment may not adequately prepare music students for the level of performance anxiety and demands on acoustics that they will experience in a formal concert setting.

In addition, Mishra and Backlin (2007) demonstrated that changes in the performance setting can lead to an increase in memory slips in piano players. In line with McGeoch's (1932) theory of context-dependent memory, this finding suggests that musical memory may be sensitive to contextual changes between the practice and performance spaces. It remains unknown exactly what elements of the performance environment significantly contribute to this effect (Mishra, 2002).

The studies listed above have typically focused on one aspect of the performance environment and looked at the practice and concert situations as isolated events. This allows for concentrated study of individual effects but renders a global interpretation difficult. The dynamic process that leads to the concert following a period of preparation done in practice rooms has not yet been explored and a comprehensive overview of musicians' perception of and response to different practice and performance settings is still to be developed. How do musicians experience the discrepancies between practice and concert environment? What varying factors are perceived as challenging and how are they dealt with? To start addressing these questions, we run a preliminary study that employed a qualitative, inductive approach to explore the interaction between musician and performing space with a focus on the change of setting between performance preparation and delivery.

1. METHOD

Participants

Participants were recruited among students who were close to completing their Master of Arts in Solo Performance at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts. This programme represents the highest degree in practical music training that is obtainable in Switzerland and culminates with a public concert — the final exam — at the Culture and Convention Centre Lucerne (KKL), accompanied by the Lucerne Symphony Orchestra. Solo performance students at this level have extensive experience in performing as professionals. They are, however, at an early stage in their professional career and the final concert at the KKL represents the passage from the status of student to that of independent musician. This population is therefore in the position to offer particularly relevant insights to music students and early career musicians.

In the academic year in which the present study was run, six students were enrolled on the MA course. All of them were contacted for participation: four (two males and two females, age range 27-29 years) agreed to take part. Participants (violin, cello, clarinet, and horn players) had 19 years of musical training on average (range 16-23 years). They all reported to be active musicians, with 61 public performances each on average (solo, ensemble, or orchestra) in the 12 months prior to the study (range 54-104). Three of them had already performed as soloist in a large venue (over 500 seats) at least once (range 1-4).

Data collection

Two in-depth, semi-structured interviews were planned with each participant at two times: between two and seven weeks prior and two weeks after the concert. Focusing the interviews around a concert event allowed us to follow students' preparation and experience of the change of setting between practice and performance and gave participants a concrete situation to refer to in the discussion. For logistical reasons the second interview could not be run with one student; therefore seven interviews were collected in total with four musicians. Interviews lasted between 22 and 69 minutes depending on the level of response from the participant; written informed consent was given by participants prior to the first interview. After some general questions on practice and rehearsal habits, the interview focused on (i) expectations about (interview 1) and experience of (interview 2) the change from the practice to the concert environment; and (ii) strategies employed to prepare for this change, including practice room qualities relevant to this preparation.

Analysis

Following the protocol described by Guest, MacQueen and Namey (2012) we (first and second authors) ran a thematic analysis on the transcribed interviews. This allowed a reading of the data from the two perspectives of the professionally trained musician with first hand concert experience and the internal architect, with competence in interior design and humans-built environment interaction. We analysed the interviews independently, first structure-coding the transcripts according to the two main research questions: *(a) How do students experience the change of setting from the practice to the concert environment? (b) What strategies, if any, do they apply to cope with this change?* We open-coded the text within each structural unit, identified salient themes and structured them into a comprehensive account of the text content. We then discussed the emergent themes taking turns in explaining a theme and justifying it by means of examples from the text. This led to the development of a codebook. Finally, we re-analysed the interviews independently applying the newly developed codebook and computed agreement to verify the appropriateness of connections between text and codes. The percentage of agreement was 86.85%, which is considered a good level of inter-coder reliability (Guest et al., 2012). Regular discussions with the third author provided external feedback on the interpretation of the emergent themes.

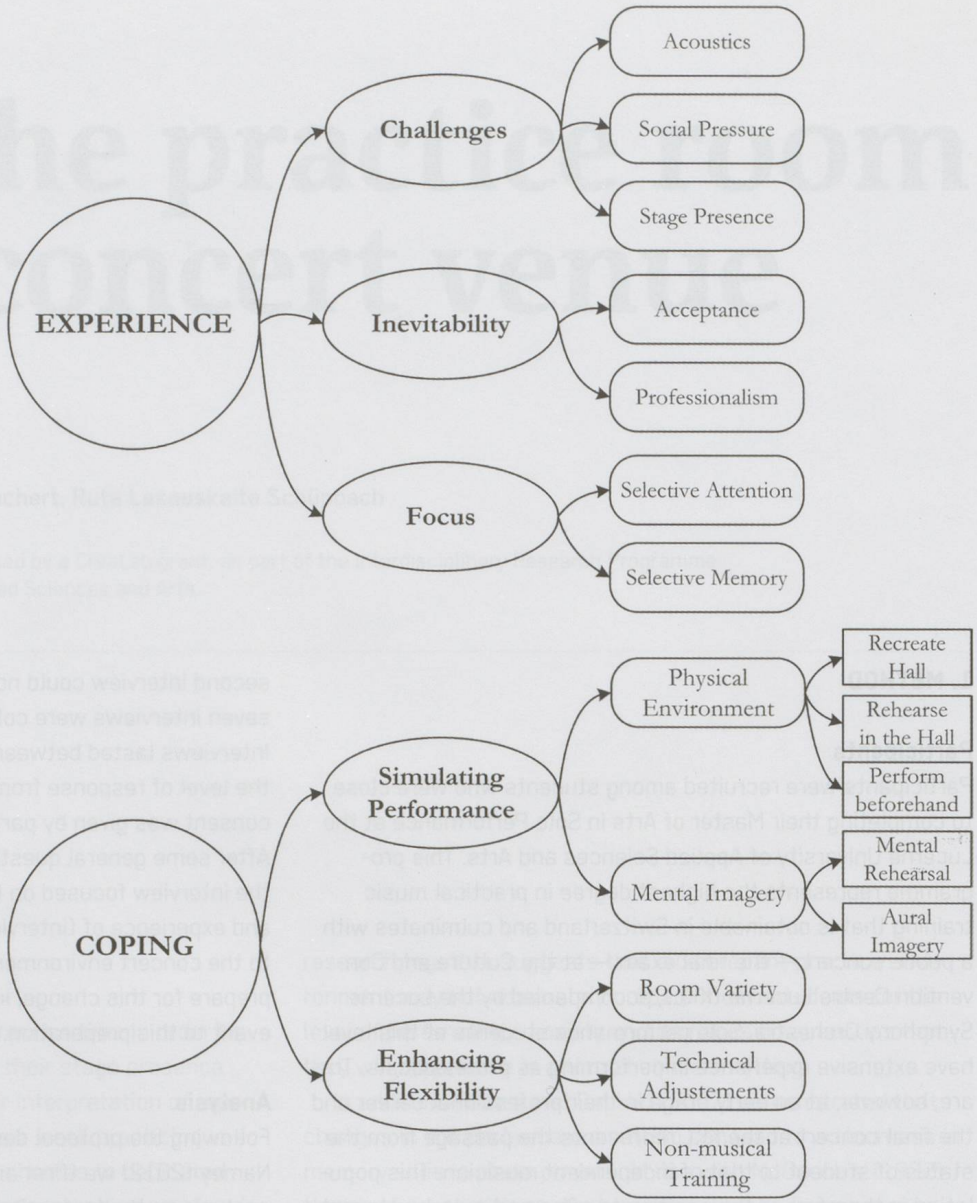

Figure 1. Descriptive model of the emergent themes: it reflects music students' Experience of (top half) and Coping (bottom half) strategies used to deal with the change from the practice to the concert environment.

2. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Two superordinate themes emerged from the analysis that reflect participants' feelings, thoughts, and expectations about the change of setting from the practice to the concert environment (**Experience**) and strategies used to prepare for this change (**Coping**). These were broken down into five main themes and seventeen sub-themes. The emergent model is shown in Figure 1. Here, a brief description and discussion of the themes is offered, with superordinate themes in bold, main themes in bold italic, and sub-themes in italic.

Experience

Three aspects of the change of setting from the practice to the concert venue were described by students as potentially problematic (***Challenges***): adapting to different sound properties of the space (*Acoustics*), dealing with the psychological tension linked to the social importance of the event and the presence of the audience (*Social Pressure*), and switching from an introvert ('playing to/for oneself') to an extrovert ('playing to/for others') approach to playing (*Stage Presence*).

Acoustics was thematised as a major issue by all students, even though how this ***Challenge*** manifests is instrument-specific (e.g., reed choice; lip muscle strength; pedal adjustments). Two salient points concerned the necessity of generating more sound volume to "fill the hall" (Student 2), and the feeling, in a big hall, of not hearing your own sound properly, which may lead to counterproductive compensatory reactions (e.g., "to push" on the instrument, Student 4):

> "This is odd, your sound is off, immediately" (Student 4)

In line with research on music performance anxiety (Sârbescu & Dorgo, 2014) students mentioned the presence of the audience as a source of apprehension (*Social Pressure*). This concern was conceptualized in terms of the desire to not let the

teacher down or to prove others and oneself that the choice of a music career was a good one in the first place:

> "I don't want to disgrace my teacher" (Student 2)

> "This was then somehow for me a kind of justification for my study... a justification for myself, generally, for what I do" (Student 2)

Comments on *Stage Presence* focused on the room size and the attitude required in the concert situation:

> "It's just such a huge space when you are there on the stage" (Student 2)

> "You need a completely different presence... you really have somehow to cast a spell over everybody" (Student 2)

> "During practice we get used to play so *[mimics closed position]* don't we? And I find that in such a hall you really have to try like this *[mimics opened position]* really open yourself" (Student 4)

These ***Challenges*** were discussed as naturally accepted components of a musicians' life *(**Inevitability**)*. Students expressed resignation about these difficulties with comments like: "...this is the life" (Student 1), "I need to survive" (Student 3), or "...there's nothing more one can do" (Student 4) *(Acceptance)*.

In line with this, mastery in coping with ***Challenges*** was discussed as a sign of expertise, a skill that professional musicians ought to possess *(Professionalism)*. Acknowledging these ***Challenges*** as difficulties was perceived as professionally inappropriate:

> "It is a question of experience. And well, we don't have it right now" (Student 4)

> "...it's difficult, but I know, but it's our job, I guess. I mean, I think that is the professional style and also being a musician... I don't like to make any excuses" (Student 1)

These feelings of resignation, acceptance and unease in voicing worries emerged as salient aspects of students' experience, highlighting a need within schools for open discussion on these topics to alleviate feelings of inadequacy students may experience as they try to cope.

Students also discussed the narrowing of the locus of attention while playing as a mitigating factor *(**Focus**)*: elements like temperature, presence of the audience, or elements of space were partially blocked out from musicians' perception *(Selective Attention)*:

> "...it's really impressive how high the whole [venue] is... and then, well at some point, I don't know, you block this somehow a bit out" (Student 2)

In accordance with these comments, students had difficulty recollecting the performance experience during the second interview *(Selective Memory)*. They could offer detailed descriptions of everything happened before and after the performance, but almost no information on the performance itself:

> "I almost can't remember what I did... The last note and it's... [finger snapping] ok: 'What happened, hello, hello?' It is strange, like these seventeen minutes, it's like... two details" (Student 1)

Coping

Two distinct and counterbalancing strategies were discussed by students as useful to cope with the change of setting from the practice to the performance environment.

On the one hand, all students discussed the necessity to practice in a setting similar in acoustics and/or atmosphere to a concert hall *(**Simulating Performance**)*. To this end they creatively incorporated elements of a concert venue in the practice environment *(Physical Environment)*. They searched for large rooms or practiced outside, for instance in a forest (Student 1), to recreate the perception of the sound 'escaping the instrument' and get acquainted with the "feeling of bigness" (Student 2) typical of the concert situation, or again used rudimentary stages to train to be "the object of exposition" (Student 2) *(Re-create Hall)*. The possibility to actually "experience the venue" (Student 2) for instance during general rehearsal or previous concerts *(Rehearse in the Hall)* or rehearsing the chosen programme in other concert-like events *(Perform beforehand)* was also discussed as helpful.

Students' effort to recreate acoustic, visual and atmospheric qualities of the concert environment during practice resonates with recent work on performance simulation by Williamon et al. (2014). There, the manipulation of selected spatial elements (light, backstage, audience) induced responses comparable with those of a real concert situation (stage anxiety and heart rate variability). Together, these findings suggest that simulation facilities could offer concrete and important practice opportunities for students, especially if these were developed so as to allow the integration of acoustic as well as atmospheric properties.

In addition to physically adapting the practice environment, students trained using aural and visual *Mental Imagery*. Three students mentally practiced the concert event *(Mental Rehearsal)*. The level of complexity and accuracy ranged from "feel the feeling of the concert" (Student 1) and, keeping this feeling alive, play through the programme, to a very detailed reproduction of the whole event from being backstage to the final bow (Student 3). In line with results by Clarke and colleagues (2012), who found that practicing the mental visualisation of the concert venue enhances confidence and stage presence in musicians, students discussed mental rehearsal as beneficial to control stage anxiety:

> "I did this exercise not much, but, I mean at least maybe three times... Then, the day I had rehearsal... I didn't have fear and also in the concert it was kind of a déjà-vu, like 'I know this situation'" (Student 3)

Students also reported practicing while imagining how the instrument would sound in the concert venue *(Aural Imagery)*. This mental sound representation was discussed as a way to test "the limits of the instrument" (Student 2) or to train

musical gestures that are inappropriate in a practice room but required in the concert venue:

> "...[my teacher] teaches me as if we were in a large hall... so that I work on the production of a possibly big sound, for example. Even if this sound is much too much for the actual room" (Student 2)

The (physical or mental) simulation of the concert setting was counterbalanced in the students' training by the active search for different practice environments (e.g., small and large, dry and resonant rooms) to improve the ability to respond and adapt to concert situations in real time (***Enhancing Flexibility***, *Room Variety)*. This was discussed by all students as beneficial to "learn to deal with the situation. To learn, indeed, flexibility" (Student 2).

The need for varying acoustic practice environments resonates with early results by Lamberty (1980). As Osman (2010) suggests, simple infrastructures like removable absorptive panels could facilitate this training strategy. No research to date has clarified the effect of multiple practice environments on performance; however studies on context-dependent memory suggest that multiple learning environments can benefit word memory recall (Smith, 1982). Following the initial findings on music-related context-effect by Mishra and Backlin (2007), the extent to which this applies to music performance should then be explored.

Practicing in plainly unfriendly acoustics was also thematised as useful: when everything "sounds horrible" during practice, you "don't need to be scared anymore of bad concert venues" (Student 4). This further emphasises the importance of promoting discussion about different strategies that can be used to prepare to perform: it remains to be seen if practicing long hours in an unfriendly acoustic increases musicians' flexibility or mars their ability to care for an aesthetically pleasant sound.

Besides practicing in different venues, *Technical Adjustments* to the instrument (e.g., preparing different reeds, Student 3, or borrowing a new instrument for the concert, Student 2) and assuring a good level of general fitness and wellbeing (*Non-musical Training*, e.g., physical exercise or sleep-time routine adjustments to prepare the body for the time schedule of the concert, Student 3) were also discussed as relevant to enhance the ability to adapt to the concert situation.

Taken together these findings suggest that the promotion of mental rehearsal training programmes and the development of practice infrastructures and simulation facilities that allow flexible manipulation of relevant perceptual qualities like atmosphere, spaciousness and acoustics could improve the effectiveness of practice sessions and enhance performance outcomes.

3. CONCLUSIONS

We interviewed four experienced music students prior to and after a solo concert to explore how discrepancies between the practice and the concert settings influence musicians' preparation and delivery of performance. These preliminary findings suggest that the discrepancy between practice and performance environments poses challenges to musicians in terms of *Acoustics*, *Social Pressure*, and *Stage Presence*. Music students report that they accept these challenges as integral elements of their profession, as challenges that must be met if one is to succeed, and may feel uncomfortable discussing what they perceive as a sign of inexperience. However, applying appropriate and informed practice strategies in terms of musical imagery, performance simulation, and the use of multiple learning environments could ease these difficulties, for instance by alleviating possible context-effects on memory recall (Mishra & Backlin, 2007; Smith, 1982) or reducing stage anxiety (Clark et al., 2012; Williamon et al., 2014).

Future studies with larger sample size and different performance conditions (solo, chamber, orchestra) should seek reinforcement of these preliminary results. Research will then be needed to test the influence of different practice strategies on the final performance and musicians' well-being. By deepening our understanding of the role of the performing space for the musical outcome in the different stages of performance training and delivery, such studies will assist music institutions in the development of a milieu and infrastructures that do not merely allow students to practice, but actively assist prospective musicians to train to perform.

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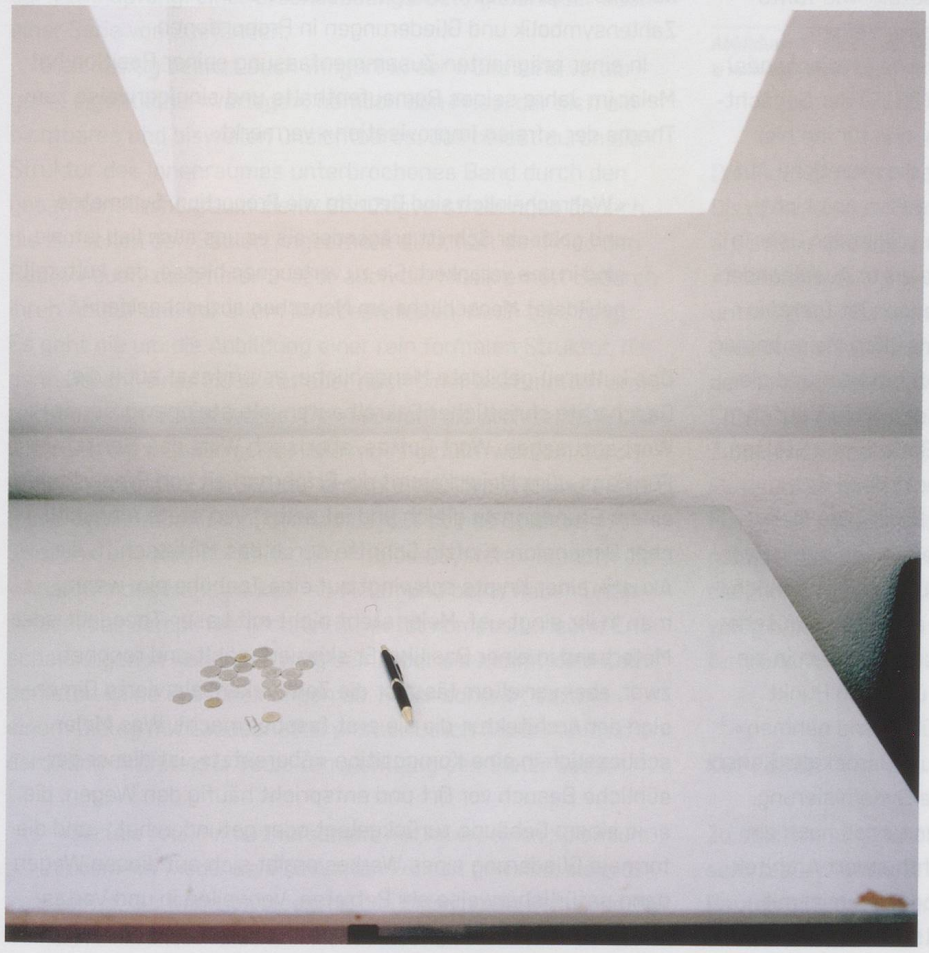
References, p. 54



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