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Ethnomusicology, entrepreneurialism and the Western classical music student

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Abstract

This article explores the potential use of ethnomusicology in the development of entrepreneurialism amongst Western classical music students studying at UK music colleges. It is argued that both ‘doing’ and ‘reading’ ethnomusicology can encourage students to explore the diverse uses and meanings attached to Western classical music in varied social and geographic contexts. The knowledge garnered through ethnomusicology can then be applied in creative, informed and situational ways by students in the development of entrepreneurial strategies. As a by-product, it is suggested that ethnomusicology can be used to reframe entrepreneurialism as a musical, relational and interactive process.

Keywords: Ethnomusicology; entrepreneurialism; Western classical music; music students; higher music education

Introduction

UK music colleges that focus primarily on Western classical music education have been criticised for not providing students with the skills and/or knowledge to engage productively with contemporary job markets (see, for example, Bennett 2008; Bennett & Bridgstock 2014). These criticisms become more pronounced when set against the events of 2020 and 2021. Trends in precarious employment in the Western classical music profession prior to the COVID-19 pandemic have been exacerbated post-lockdown by limitations on concerts, the closure of live music venues, as well as restrictions on in-person teaching, rehearsing and performing. In addition, the finalised Brexit deal means that UK-based Western classical musicians now have to evidence a plethora of documents to work and perform in Europe (see https://musiciansunion.org.uk/legal-money/rights-andlegislation/brexit-guidance-for-musicians/flowchart-guide-to-working-in-europe?fbclid=IwAR0oqIRr_RIisv1nxtimhR20ARq-Kd3ZKFVcGJGKhAxWPYKDP6xcafySBCY). As a result, the Musicians’ Union reported that, in 2020, c. 80% of professional musicians are now considering careers outside of music (see <https://musiciansunion.org.uk/news/coronavirus-presses-mute-button-on-music-industry>). Thinking strategically, realistically and creatively about the Western classical music profession is, therefore, increasingly pertinent for both students’ and professional musicians’ mental and physical welfare.

Whilst entrepreneurialism has been studied in UK higher music education institutions for some time – BIMM and LIPA, for instance – UK music colleges that focus primarily on Western classical music education have only recently begun to deliver courses that equip students with the entrepreneurial skillsets and sensibilities deemed to be needed in contemporary job markets. The Royal Academy of Music, for example, offers undergraduate students a course on ‘self-promotion and marketing, writing CVs, making funding applications, understanding the music business and working in arts management’. The teaching of entrepreneurialism to Western classical music students has, moreover, faced a number of challenges. Music students often conceptualise entrepreneurialism as an activity associated with business and profiteering that exists in tension with the aesthetic values of music and the arts in general (see Bridgstock, 2012). There have

subsequently been calls amongst educators to reframe entrepreneurialism as a musical and social activity. Bridgstock (2012) notes, therefore, that the “practice of entrepreneurship in the arts is significantly different from the practice of entrepreneurship in business, in terms of the artist’s drivers and aims, as well as the nature of entrepreneurial opportunities, contexts and processes. These differences mean that entrepreneurship curricula cannot simply be imported from business schools.” Gary Beckman (2007) relatedly argues for an approach to entrepreneurship education in arts institutions that emphasises the ‘contextualised nature of social practice’ as opposed to a ‘narrow focus’ on business skills or professional development.

The challenge in encouraging Western classical music students to engage with entrepreneurialism is perhaps further exacerbated by the educational ethos of music colleges. Prevailing ideologies and practices that surround Western classical music have been identified as potentially stifling to the development of the creative, social and musical skillsets integral to the formulation of entrepreneurial strategies and mindsets. These include the privileging of the ontological status of scores and composers that, it is argued, undermines the creativity of performers (Hunter & Broad, 2017; Leech-Wilkson, 2016, 2021), one-to-one teaching that generates overreliance on individual teachers (Haddon, 2011), the emphasis on formal education ahead of informal learning (Burnard & Haddon, 2016), restricted performer–audience interaction, especially in traditional concert halls (Clarke, 2002), as well as individualised practice routines (Bull, 2019). Authors have subsequently argued for radical changes to the types of education provided in music colleges. Anna Bull, for example, argues students should be taught wide-ranging skills such as music production that prepare them for increasingly diverse career pathways (Bull, 2019: 192).

Whilst the above debates and arguments have usefully unveiled some of the more problematic discourses, practices and ideologies that surround Western classical music education in the UK and beyond, the oppositional (and at time accusatory) language used can be off-putting to both teachers and students already committed to the institutions and educational approaches being criticised. Moreover, incorporating radical changes to the education offered at music colleges may be slow and constrained by financial and logistical concerns. The challenge, therefore, is to encourage thinking about Western classical music, music education and entrepreneurialism that does not alienate those involved, but that also acknowledges the increasingly plural career and educational pathways many musicians now follow. Furthermore, approaches that can be incorporated into existing curricula without undue disruption, both in terms of curriculum design as well as cost-effectiveness, should be foregrounded. Finally, approaches that encourage dialogue and collaboration across the diverse stakeholders involved – from teachers and students to the communities that music colleges seek to engage – should be central to the process of developing entrepreneurial strategies and skillsets.

Taking the above context as a springboard, this article makes a case for the use of ethnomusicology as an educational tool for learning and developing entrepreneurial skillsets amongst students studying at UK music colleges. First, the article provides a working definition of ethnomusicology and outlines the central role of fieldwork within ethnomusicological research. The article then explores the potential benefits of “doing” ethnomusicology. I argue that encouraging Western classical music students to view themselves as ethnomusicologists can serve to reframe entrepreneurialism as an experiential and musical activity in ways that map neatly onto approaches advocated in arts and social entrepreneurship. The case is then made for the benefits of “reading” ethnomusicology in the development of entrepreneurial skills amongst Western classical music students. I argue that reading ethnomusicological literature can alert students to the diverse meanings, applications and histories Western classical music can have in diverse geographic and social contexts.

“Defining” ethnomusicology

The Society for Ethnomusicology describes ethnomusicology as the study of ‘not only *what* music is but *why* it is: what music means to its practitioners and audiences, and how those meanings are conveyed’ (Society for Ethnomusicology italics original). Ethnomusicology draws on a wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches that can help to unravel the multiple influences that shape musical traditions around the world, be these musical, cultural, technological, material and so on. Whilst, traditionally, ethnomusicologists have tended to study musical traditions that are deemed to lie beyond the boundaries of Western classical music and, indeed, the “West”, in recent years a plethora of ethnomusicological studies of Western classical music have been published (see, for example, Nooshin, 2014; Avis, 2021; forthcoming; Beckles Willson, 2009; Ramnarine, 2017). Nicholas Cook has described the proliferation of these studies as symptomatic of an interdisciplinary shift in the study of Western classical music that has encompassed greater scholarly reflexivity, increased attention to performance (away from the notated score) and an ‘understanding of music in its multiple cultural contexts, embracing production, performance, reception, and all other activities by virtue of which music is constructed as a significant cultural practice’ (2008: 49. Cited in Nooshin 2014: 3).

Fieldwork – described by Liz Przybylski as the process through which ‘the researcher engages in cultural practices as a participant while simultaneously observing the field with critical ears and eyes, all the while making it known to others in the scene that participant observation is part of an overt research process’ (2020: 3) – is a defining method of ethnomusicology (Rice, 2014: 1). The aims of fieldwork, according to Tim Rice’s description in *Ethnomusicology: A Very Short Introduction*, are to ‘live in a community; participate in and observe and record musical events; interview musicians, their patrons, and audiences; and learn to sing, play, and dance’ (Ibid.: 27). Rice (Ibid.: 1–10) has identified five core activities that comprise fieldwork:

1. Interviews: these can be formal or semi-formal and be conducted with musicians, audience members, teachers and whoever else may be directly or indirectly involved with the musical culture being studied.
2. Participant observation: this is broadly defined as participating in or experiencing a variety of musical (and social) activities relevant to the musical culture being studied.
3. Music and dance lessons: this can include both receiving and giving lessons.
4. Documentation of fieldwork, which can take the form of field notes as well as audio and video recordings.
5. And, finally, ongoing analysis of the above that occurs both during and after the period of fieldwork, and that aids the researcher to ‘understand the personal, social, and cultural meanings attributed to [the musical culture being studied]’.

As Titon (2008) notes, fieldwork ‘need not involve travel to a distant place – ‘fieldwork’ can be playing music with other individuals and the ‘field’ that shared experience’. Many contemporary ethnomusicologists therefore ‘stay at home and study their own community or travel within their own home country to research other communities in our increasingly multicultural society’ (Barz & Timothy, 2008: 13). Contemporary fieldwork, moreover, can include virtual and digital ‘fields’ that reflect the greater range of digital experiences and interactions that mediate contemporary musicians’ lives (see Cooley, Meizel, & Syed, 2008; Przybylski, 2020). Whether fieldwork takes place in person or ‘virtually’, it is primarily an ‘experiential, dialogic, participatory way of knowing and being in the world generated [through] actively joining in a society’s music cultural practices (including sounds, concepts, social interactions, materials – a society’s total involvement with music’ (Cooley & Barz, 2008: 16). Fieldworkers thus become active social participants in the musical cultures and societies they are engaged with, navigating fieldwork as both an ‘individual and communal experience’ (Ibid.: 23).

Finally, ethnomusicology has been described as an inherently reflexive process. Ethnomusicologists ‘acknowledge, accept, and sometimes confront our understanding of music in its social, historical, political, religious, and economic contexts – to explore how meanings are variously produced, subverted, mediated, and celebrated in music’ (Post, 2013: 2). This has encompassed engagement with a variety of debates that revolve around, for example, ‘gendered, racial, ethnic, and national identities; about the effects of globalisation and technology on individuals and communities; and about issues connected to intellectual property and human rights that affect so many people across the globe’ (Ibid.). Reflexivity also includes self-reflection on fieldworkers’ positional in relation to the communities being engaged with as well as the relationship between the musical tradition they are involved with and ‘other’ musical traditions. As a result, ethnomusicology can lead to self-reflection, as Kisliuk describes: ‘we get to know other people by making ourselves known to them, and through them to know ourselves again, in a continuous cycle’ (Kisliuk, 2008: 53).

‘Doing’ ethnomusicology

we already are social actors within just about any cultural phenomena that we might wish to study. Another way to look at this is that we are already in the field. We are all fieldworkers (Cooley & Barz 2008: 24).

So, in what ways can ethnomusicological fieldwork enhance the development of entrepreneurial skills amongst Western classical music students? First, following Rice’s quote at the beginning of this section, we can suggest that Western classical music students are already ‘fieldworkers’ within the broad and relational field of Western classical music. This includes students’ position as social actors in the institutions within which they study, the communities and cities within which they live, perform and learn, as well as, more broadly (and increasingly), their position in relation to transnational musical and institutional networks. Reframing Western classical music students as fieldworkers who are already socially and musically participating in a range of activities provides a significant springboard for the development of entrepreneurial strategies.

If it is acknowledged that Western classical music students are already fieldworkers, then the kinds of fieldwork promoted in ethnomusicology can offer various routes through which students can explore Western classical music’s position within a range of regional, national and international contexts. Students could, for example, be encouraged to conduct ethnomusicological studies, drawing on Rice’s five core activities of fieldwork, of the ways in which Western classical music is received and engaged with by local communities. A question to guide students’ studies could be: What barriers inhibit a given community’s participation with Western classical music? Drawing on the empirical data generated by interviews, students could then analyse the various factors – material, musical, cultural, social, financial – that may influence a particular community’s engagement with Western classical music. Students could then consider the ways in which they may, or indeed may not, be able to circumnavigate these barriers to encourage community engagement with Western classical music in sustainable, ethical and productive ways. Students subsequently will be encouraged to reflect on a range of perspectives on Western classical music, not all of which will be positive, that are vital to the process of developing sensitive, effective and affective approaches to entrepreneurialism. The strength of ethnomusicology here is the combined focus of fieldwork and reflexivity that encourages dialogue between students and communities.

The above experiences may also highlight the heterogeneous histories and practices of Western classical music. To slightly adapt a quote of Norton and Matsumoto, Western classical music¹ ‘is not a homogenous entity in terms of context, style and original social function’ nor is it ‘monolithic neither in content, in its intended audiences, nor in its reception’ (2018: 4). One need to only consider the improvisatory techniques found in Baroque music (figured bass, for example)

or the aleatoric techniques found in contemporary art music (the music of Stockhausen, for instance) to illustrate the diverse practices and histories that can be encompassed by the term Western classical music. It is important, therefore, that students acknowledge that Western classical music has been and continues to be a mutable musical tradition, subject to ongoing transformations. Indeed, professional Western classical musicians are involved with increasingly diverse performance practices that take place alongside musicians from a variety of traditions. The Manchester Collective, for example, are a group of young performers – mostly graduates of UK music colleges – who programme innovative performances of ‘Western classical music’. Recently, the group performed an arrangement of the South African song ‘Ka Bohaleng’ (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJZ4zd7Acq0&ab_channel=ManchesterCollective). In the performance, the performers draw on the skills developed through their formal education (e.g. score-reading and ensemble playing) alongside skills not typically developed within UK music colleges (e.g. singing whilst playing an instrument and call and response musical techniques that involve audience participation). Such performances can be used to attract and sustain new audiences through innovative programming as well as to enhance performance techniques that are valuable to performing musics that may lie beyond that typically considered ‘Western classical music’.

The musical focus of ethnomusicology can be particularly useful in this respect: encouraging students to musically explore a range of traditions and practices on their principal instruments can prepare them for diverse performance contexts and, subsequently, job opportunities. Moreover, from an educational perspective, these varied musical experiences can also encourage students to reflect on Western classical music’s performance practices and, even, conceptualisations of Western classical music. Liz Haddon (2016), for example, has explored the experiences of UK-based music students whose primary study is Western classical music but who in addition study Balinese gamelan. Studying Balinese gamelan, she suggests, can encourage self-reflection on attitudes to performance and learning. According to Haddon’s research, benefits include the development of ‘awareness, flexibility, openness, tolerance, disengagement with the “ego”, affirmation of others and of the ensemble as a whole, and interest in experimentation’ (Ibid.: 22). Whilst there is, perhaps, a note of Orientalism in Haddon’s arguments – Balinese gamelan is associated with intuition whilst the Western classical music tradition is associated with its absence – encouraging students to pursue diverse musical experiences can shape the creative and innovative attitudes Beckman (2007) argues are central to arts entrepreneurship as well as reflection on what Western classical music can and does mean today. These musical experiences need not necessarily include musical traditions from ‘elsewhere’, however, but could also include the diverse musical practices found within Western classical music.

Relatedly, Western classical music is increasingly performed in venues beyond the concert hall. The Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (OAE), for example, have programmed performances in public houses.² The following trailer advertises the group’s ‘Night shift’ tour of London-based pubs (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q2V18CnEX9M&ab_channel=OrchestraoftheAgeofEnlightenment). The footage includes interviews through which audience members and performers describe their experience of the performance. Margaret Faultless, the musical director of OAE, is quoted stating:

The audience are very close and you’re aware that it is a combined experience. I mean you’re doing it with them. It’s not just us on stage and then people listening. But in the end that’s what makes it actually more interesting to play, and more of a total experience. And I’d rather be here than in a lot of concert halls.

According to Faultless, then, such performance contexts demand different kinds of performance skills to those typically encountered in conventional concert halls. Eric Clarke (2002: 186) has argued that concert hall performance generates a stark separation between audiences and

performers, whereas Faultless' description of performing in pubs emphasises the more intimate and direct interaction between performers and audience members. Participation in similar performances can expose students to a variety of performance contexts and develop performance skills such as audience–performer interaction. Moreover, encouraging students to engage directly with audiences before and after performances – either online or in person – can generate understandings of the ways in which such performances are received, and, further, what this reception can tell us about audience tastes, expectations and values (see the trailer for the OEA's 'Nightshift' for some examples of this).

Finally, conducting ethnomusicological studies of musical groups (e.g. the Manchester Collective or the OAE) can provide insights into the relationship between Western classical music, performance and the business skills required for establishing and sustaining a musical organisation. Bruno Nettl characterises ethnomusicology as 'bringing into focus transmission processes and musical meanings as situated among real people in real time' as well as 'the manner in which music and musicians actively construct their own social, political, and economic worlds' (Nettl, 2016: 23-24). By speaking with active musicians, students should be encouraged to explore the symbiotic relationship between performance programmes, the economic structure of music organisations and strategies adopted for promoting organisations and performances. As a by-product, through ethnomusicological enquiry and the mobilisation of fieldwork techniques – interviews, surveys and so on – students will develop a range of skills that are increasingly in demand in the music profession today, including market research skills, exposure to arts administration and audience engagement (see Titon, 2016: 6). Indeed, contextualising Western classical music as a social practice could, in addition, alert students to the diverse professional roles musicians increasingly occupy (e.g. working simultaneously as manager, promoter, performer and teacher) as well as musicians' aesthetic, musical and social concerns.

'Reading' ethnomusicology

In this section, I make the case for incorporating the reading of ethnomusicological texts into entrepreneurial courses in UK music colleges. As already noted, a wide range of ethnomusicological studies that examine Western classical music have been published. Studies have focused on topics ranging from Western classical music's position within HE institutions in the US (see Kingsbury, 1988; Nettl, 1995) and the global dissemination of orchestras (Beckles Willson, 2009; Baker, 2014; Ramnarine, 2017) to studies of international communities involved with Western classical music (see Yoshihara, 2007; Wang, 2009; Avis, *forthcoming*). In this section, I argue that engaging with ethnomusicological studies of Western classical music can serve to alert UK-based music students to the diverse ways in which Western classical music is (re)defined and used in a variety of geographic and musical settings (cf. Norton and Matsumoto, 2018: 4; Nooshin, 2014: 12). To illustrate my argument, I focus on insights from an ethnomusicological study of Western classical music in contemporary Indian cities, focusing on the experiences of alumni of a higher music education institution in Chennai, India (Avis, *forthcoming*).

Case study: KM Music Conservatory alumni, India

KM Music Conservatory (KM) is a private higher music education institution in Chennai, India, established in 2008 by the internationally renowned film composer AR Rahman and accredited by Middlesex University, UK. Students enrolled on KM's 2-year diploma programme study Western classical music, Hindustani classical music and audio engineering. The majority of students and alumni were the first in their family to study Western classical music, and all noted their immediate and extended families had little knowledge of Western classical music. Here I will highlight two points drawn from interviews with KM alumni of their experiences of disseminating

Western classical music as well as the application of practices associated with Western classical music to a range of musical contexts.

First, all alumni noted difficulties in attracting and sustaining audiences for Western classical music in India. To overcome these difficulties, students developed innovative strategies to ‘expose’ Indian audiences to Western classical music. Abhinav Sridharan, an alumnus of KM, had founded Opera India – an initiative that aimed to ‘make operatic music more comprehensible to the Indian audience’. Through Opera India, Sridharan programmed operatic music alongside Hindi film songs that shared a lyrical theme such as ‘love’ to aid Hindi-speaking audiences understand and engage with the operatic piece. Sridharan explained in an interview with me that ‘The meaning of that piece was understood because the Italian piece meant the same thing. [...] Here [in India], after we came and performed, people started understanding the opera. Whatever we sang in French, Italian, German they understood’. This strategy subsequently generated work and performance opportunities as well as new audiences for Sridharan and others involved with Opera India, including a performance on the popular Indian television show, Music Mojo (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TffgRI7O3ds&ab_channel=MathrubhumiKappaTV). Opera India, in a similar way to Manchester Collective, provides an example of the ways in which Western classical music can be framed by another musical tradition – Hindi film songs – to provide a point of reference for audiences unfamiliar with Western classical music.

Second, students and alumni also illustrated the application of skills learnt through Western classical music education to Indian film music contexts. Lavin, an alumnus of KM who worked in India’s film music industries, noted that a combination of Western and Hindustani classical music knowledge was useful for his career: ‘[With Western] it’s more harmonically and here [with Hindustani] it’s more a melody. [...] It’s useful in film music. Say I have an Indian melody and I have to orchestrate it [but] I still need the raag in my mind’. Lavin similarly described drawing on interpretive skills developed through performing Western art songs, such as Schumann’s song cycle *Dichterliebe*, and applying these skills to aid with interpretation in the performance of film songs. As he described: ‘I did *Dichterliebe* for my final recital [at KM], it’s [an] emotional journey – the pieces have pain and anger, and I have to experiment with my voice, the lyrics are important. [...] I take those learning skills into the vocal booth. [...] What should be the delivery of the song, my interpretation. It goes back to interpreting a musical score’. Lavin illustrates, therefore, that the skills generated through Western classical music can be applied in a variety of musical and cultural contexts. This can serve as a springboard to expand UK-based students’ awareness of the ways in which they can apply the musical skills learnt through Western classical music to a range of musical settings beyond those typically associated with Western classical music.

Finally, both interviews illustrate the entangled transnational histories of Western classical music with ‘other’ urban musical traditions such as Indian film music. Briefly, orchestras were employed in India’s metropolitan cities – Bombay (now Mumbai), for example – during the early twentieth century to accompany silent films in prestigious auditoriums. With the development of technology to record sound films – the first ‘talkie’, ‘*Alam Ara*’ was released in 1931 – the sound of string orchestras would become a dominant and integral aesthetic component of Indian films until the late 1990s (see Booth, 2008). Indeed, ethnomusicologist Anna Morcom (2017) has described the use of the orchestra in Indian film music as symbolic of India’s postcolonial modernity as well as ‘a largely overlooked part of the globalization of western (classical) music and its mediation and radical synthesis in different cultural contexts’ (2017: 210). Reading ethnomusicological texts can therefore illustrate the diverse ways in which practices typically associated with Western classical music have become embedded within musical traditions beyond the ‘West’. Moreover, through Indian film music, we are encouraged to consider broader colonial and post-colonial histories, including Western classical music’s dissemination through European communities during, for example, the rise in power of the British East India Company (1600–1857) and the British Raj (1857–1947) and its transformations post-Indian Independence (1947). Encouraging students to consider the ways in which these histories intersect with Western classical music can serve as a

springboard to consider a complexity of debates surrounding ‘decolonisation’, ‘diversity’ and ‘democratisation’ in Western classical music education.

Concluding thoughts

This article has made the case for the benefits of both ‘doing’ and ‘reading’ ethnomusicology in the development of entrepreneurial strategies for Western classical music students studying at UK music colleges. It has been argued that there is untapped potential for ethnomusicology to reframe entrepreneurialism as a social, musical and relational practice. Ethnomusicology can encourage us to think about the broader structures that govern and shape job markets and careers in music, including socioeconomic factors, institutions, urbanism and so on. The flexibility of ethnomusicology also encourages students to adapt entrepreneurial strategies to their personal aims, objectives and values. Some students may seek to diversify their musical skillsets through engagement with multiple musical genres and styles from around the world, as well as explore performances in venues beyond traditional concert halls. Others may seek to explore the diversity of practices that can be found within Western classical music, from the improvisatory approaches employed in Baroque music to the aleatoric techniques found in minimalism. And some may decide to focus exclusively on what has been described as the hyper-specialised performance practices and teaching approaches found in UK music colleges (Bull, 2019). The point is that students are empowered to engage in informed ways with their educational, musical and professional identities. Perhaps most significantly, the arguments I have presented in this article do not demand radical change to extant educational practices. Rather, ethnomusicology provides a toolkit through which students can engage with Western classical music that simultaneously encourages collaborative, dialogic and reciprocal approaches to music and entrepreneurial education. Incorporating ethnomusicology into the syllabus offered by music colleges is, therefore, something that both those invested in ‘conventional’ education offered in music colleges as well as those critical of such education can embrace.

Notes

1 Norton and Matsumoto use the term ‘Western art music’.

2 Here I draw on the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of a public house (or pub) as ‘A building whose principal business is the sale of alcoholic drinks to be consumed on the premises’, although a broader, if rarer, definition of a public house could also be offered as ‘A building belonging or open to the community at large; a building for public use, a public building.’

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