

Creating intergenerational meeting spaces through sharing musical experiences

Author information: Anke Hoepfner-Ryan was an international opera singer performing major principal roles for 35 years. She is a Lecturer in Voice, Opera and German diction and the discipline lead for classical voice at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, The University of Sydney, Australia. She can be contacted at this email: anke.ryan@sydney.edu.au

Abstract

This paper examines how intergenerational meeting spaces can be created through shared musical experiences and explores the resulting educational benefits for undergraduate vocal students at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. Drawing on integrated training in voice, diction, and performance, the study investigates how students develop broader graduate qualities—including cultural competence, communication, and reflective practice—through authentic audience engagement. Two learning contexts are examined: the Demant Dreikurs Scholarship Competition and the student-founded Concordia Ensemble opera company. Reflections from students and feedback from audience members highlight the potential of classical music to transcend generational boundaries, cultivate intercultural dialogue, and strengthen community relationships. The findings emphasise the value of small-scale, interpersonal performance experiences within higher education and point to new pedagogical opportunities for integrating intergenerational engagement into conservatoire training.

Keywords: intergenerational meeting spaces, shared musical experiences, educational benefits, vocal students, cultural competence, classical music, audience engagement, Concordia Ensemble, Demant Dreikurs Scholarship Competition.

Creating intergenerational meeting spaces through sharing musical experiences

Vocal students at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music undergo comprehensive training to prepare for future workforce engagements. With a significant focus on the continued development of expertise in their chosen disciplines, broader skills like critical thinking, communication, and inventiveness, the development of cultural competence and becoming integrated professional, ethical and personal identities (Frawley, 2017, p. 2) significantly informs the learning contents of the diction and performance courses of the undergraduate voice cohorts as part of their principal studies. Specialising in Western Art music and drawing from the rich repertoires of classical art song forms of nearly 400 years of music, the voice students focus on developing the interdisciplinary skills to perform the chosen repertoires authentically and meaningfully in at least four of the major classical voice languages Italian, German, French, and English. Three significant pillars of voice education scaffold the voice students' development:

1. The one-on-one lessons with their voice teachers in which the students address the development of their voice-technical skills individually,
2. The development of diction skills in a class setting enables the students to understand the phonation of languages different to their own and how the syntax and meaning of the text fit into the musical writing, and
3. The development of performance skills in a class setting enables the students to communicate the meanings of their songs to an audience.

Developing cultural competence lies mainly within the class settings of the performance and diction classes. The different cultural backgrounds of the students (e.g., Chinese, Indian, Korean, Japanese, Portuguese, Dutch, and Australian) encourage the analysis and performance of repertoire through the reflection of their own cultural values and performance traditions.

The diction classes are challenging as it takes time to develop the phonetic concepts of the performance languages in connection with the necessary ear training. The following quote from Johnston's comparative approach to German and English diction illuminate the scope of the learning tasks:

In any language, vowels carry the prime emotional content of a sound. They are also chief vehicles for intonation. To assert that vowels are more important than consonants would be false. Vowels and consonants must be given the same careful consideration. (2016, p. 73)

At the end of their studies at the SCM, the students must distinguish 20 English, 15 German, 12 French, and seven Italian vowel sounds, not to mention the consonant sounds. The ability to produce the sounds of a language to create a synergy between the music and the text is but one of the prerequisites for a successful performance. The ability to communicate the meaning of text and music with an audience through combining the interdisciplinary skills acquired in voice and diction lessons is at the heart of the coursework taught in Vocal Performance classes of the classical voice cohorts. The classes are structured as weekly workshops with the primary focus on the refinement of concert performance skills, the critical analysis of their own and their peers' performances, and the cultivation of creative collaboration with peers to foster the development and application of problem-solving strategies. The students gain depth of disciplinary expertise by gaining confidence in their execution of communication skills like greeting the audience, introducing fellow musicians, and introducing a musical program to the audience. They learn how to be artistically present on the performance platform for the duration of a performance, including entering and exiting the stage, based on Davidson's studies about the effective use of physical gestures in conveying musical intentions (Davidson 1991, 1993, 1994, as cited in Coimbra & Davidson, 2017, p. 202) and Coimbra's and Davidson's suggestion that the body plays a crucial perceptual role in comprehending and communicating the essence of a musical piece to the audience (2017). By observing, analysing, and discussing their classmates' performances, the students develop the ability to exercise critical judgment and learn to think independently while recognising the limitations of their knowledge.

Due to the extensive content and broad learning objectives inherent in the curriculum, it is not uncommon for students and educators to become engrossed in the pursuit of acquiring skills, potentially overlooking the fundamental purpose of music-making and its societal implications. We make music for people. It is an intrinsic form of communication with our inner selves and the audience and, as such, impacts people's lives and society. With such a high emphasis on building performance skills, it is vital to provide opportunities to meet the audience, not only on larger concert platforms but in small intimate settings, to experience the visceral reactions from the audience to one's performance. This idea motivated several ongoing research projects involving the undergraduate voice cohorts at the SCM. We initiated the Demant Dreikurs Scholarship Competition (DDSSC) for the entire undergraduate voice cohort as a work-integrated learning opportunity during which the students competed for an existing scholarship. Following an audition process, five finalists would compete against each other for a monetary prize by singing a program of German art

songs. The finalists apply their interdisciplinary voice technical, German diction, and performance skills, singing German language art songs in front of members of NSW-based German-speaking communities and their representatives and Australian audiences of all ages. The non-competing students engage in the process by organising, marketing, ticketing, running, and presenting the bilingual event (Hoeppner & Reid, 2022).

Predictably, the older and more experienced students were better positioned to reach the finals than the first-year cohort. Hence, we established a platform for the first-year cohort to interact with the audience, fostering engagement and actively participating in the management of the competition. This involvement encompassed assuming all responsibilities related to direct contact with the audience, like front-of-house operations, ushering duties, and engaging audience members in conversations during the after-concert festivities.

Amidst other learning aims, we wanted to direct the students' thinking towards the audience, the people they would perform for after graduation. Removed from performance anxiety and worry about their own singing or the assessment of their own performance by teachers, the students could observe the performing singers' interaction with and the impact on the audience. We then asked the first-year cohort in an e-self-reflective questionnaire about their experiences while engaging with the audience. 95.23% of students enjoyed the experiences, and only 4.77% did not enjoy the experience or felt indifferent. The following quotes are representative of why the students liked their audience engagement:

- “The crowd participation in voting [the audience voted for a favourite singer who was presented with the audience prize], and meeting some of the German people who came to watch, and hearing about why they liked certain singers' interpretations (Stella).”
- “I enjoyed the communication and new connections we made with the older people (Anja).”
- “It was fun to discover unique facts about each singer and portray that to the audience (Jack).”
- “I was conversing with German people and was able to have some nice conversations and learn some German phrases from them and have some interesting discussions while serving them (Michael).”

Our findings showed that meeting and engaging with the audience positively affected the students. In return, the interaction with the students led to positive feedback from the German communities:

- “What a splendid Saturday afternoon it was at the Conservatorium! The Demant Dreikurs Song Scholarship Competition was much enjoyed by all of us in the audience! We had some lovely conversations with the students and felt looked after (Beate).”
- “The students put much heart and soul into preparing and staging this special event - hard work turned into success once again. Congratulations (Christa)!”
- “From reception to finish, all students did a great job. Their friendliness and smiles added a special touch! All guests felt warmly welcomed and looked after (Sonja).”
- “Once again it was a pleasure to be at the Conservatorium for this special event! Please, thank the students so much for all the engagement, it is much appreciated (Rainald).”

The positive feedback received from both students and audiences regarding their engagement with each other in the context of classical music performances suggests the need for further exploration into harnessing this positive interaction for enhanced educational benefits.

An additional pedagogical objective of the DDSSC encompassed instilling entrepreneurial thinking among the students and fostering their active involvement in engaging with society by creating their own performance opportunities beyond the SCM. A group of first-year students took this to heart and founded the Sydney-based not-for-profit opera company Concordia Ensemble. Despite the adverse effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, the company has entered its fourth year of operation. Distinguishing itself from typical performances in Sydney, the company showcases a broader range of composers, including those often underrepresented, such as female and Australian composers. Notably, each season includes at least one composer from these underrepresented groups. The overarching aim is to offer affordable and easily accessible performance experiences to audiences while simultaneously providing professional development opportunities for young performers (Concordia Ensemble, 2022). In his article “Music in Society and Politics”, Brunner cites Neuhoff’s research, which reveals that classical music audiences, despite being commonly associated with older demographics, encompass a wide range of age groups (Neuhoff, 2007, p. 6, as cited in Brunner, 2010, p. 16). A recently conducted analysis of the ages of Concordia Ensemble’s audiences supports the findings about the diversity of age groups, with 25% belonging to the age group of 50-69 years, 25% to the group of 20-29 years, 13.97% to the group of 40-49 years, 13.97% to the group of 70 years and older, 11.03% to the group of 10-

19 years and 11.03% to the group of 30-39 years of age. The company was affected by Covid 19 lockdowns, and further data must be collected to be conclusive. Should this trend be confirmed, it can be concluded that classical music can uniquely transcend generational boundaries and attract individuals from diverse age groups, cultivating a sense of cultural continuity and providing a platform for intergenerational dialogue.

Educating the next generations of young musicians ensures the preservation of all forms of music and allows them to appreciate the historical and societal contexts from which the music emerged. Concerts, recitals, and community events create spaces where individuals of all ages can come together and engage in shared musical experiences. By fostering an environment that encourages individuals of all ages to engage with classical music, we create a harmonious space where stories and music intertwine, transcending generations and connecting us through the power of artistic expression.

References

- Brunner, G. (2010). *Musik in Gesellschaft und Politik* (pp. 8–36).
- Coimbra, D., & Davidson, J. W. (2017). Assessing Vocal Performance 1. In *The music practitioner* (pp. 201–213). Routledge.
- Concordia Ensemble. (n.d.). Concordia Ensemble. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from <http://www.concordiaensemble.org/>
- Hoepfner, A., & Reid, A. (2022) How voice students become professionals through active learning experiences. In K. Enomoto, R. Warner, & C. Nygaard, (Eds.), *Active learning in higher education: Student engagement and deeper learning outcomes* (pp. 35-62). Libri Publishing.
- Frawley, J. (2017, June 16). *Graduate qualities – what are they and why are they important? – Teaching@Sydney*. <https://educational-innovation.sydney.edu.au/teaching@sydney/graduate-qualities-important/>
- Johnston, A. (2016). *English and German Diction for Singers: A Comparative Approach*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Neuhoff, H. (2007). *Die Konzertpublika der deutschen Gegenwartskultur: Empirische Publikumsforschung in der Musiksoziologie*. na.