

Orchestral Composers' School Study: Report to Participants

Dr. Karlin G. Love and Prof. Margaret S. Barrett
University of Queensland

The purpose of this study was to examine the phenomenon of orchestral composition pedagogy through a case study investigation of a five-day composers' school situated within an Australian professional symphony orchestra and led by eminent Australian composer-teachers.

Much has been written about characteristics of creative practice and principles of orchestration. However, research that investigates the ways in which orchestral composition is taught, particularly with non-novice students and within the context of a professional rehearsal-performance workshop, is scarce. Amabile proposed that both creativity-relevant and domain-relevant skills and knowledge are necessary for creative practice. Creative and expert practice both aim to extend domains, thus expertise development is necessary preparation for practice at a professional level. Little research has addressed aspiring professional creators, unlike that investigating aspiring experts. Thus to better understand teaching and learning for students aspiring to professional creative practice, this study brings expertise development perspectives to the creative domain of music composition. For this reason, two questions were formulated to underpin this case study investigation:

- 1: What teaching and learning practices occur in this Composers' School?
- 2: How have these teaching and learning practices contributed to the developing expertise and voice of this cohort of emerging composers?

The study investigated orchestral composition pedagogy by exploring Composers' School participants' perceptions of teaching and learning through intensive observations and interviews over the course of two iterations of the School. Participants interviewed included current composer-students (5), composer-students from prior or later iterations (5), composer-teachers (4) including the conductor and school director, orchestral players (4), and the orchestra's education coordinator.

Composer-students brought completed orchestral works and orchestration exercises for rehearsal and performance by the hosting orchestra. During the five days of the School, composer-students also attended orchestration demonstrations and lectures, masterclasses, and individual lessons with composer-teachers. Observation data were generated with participants throughout School activities; interviews were conducted at the beginning of the School and several months afterwards to examine enduring impacts.

The study found that orchestral composition pedagogy within this School environment can be described as mentored immersion in an orchestral environment. Most activities occurring within the School, such as orchestral rehearsal calls, masterclasses, and individual lessons can be grouped under one of two macro-processes:

1. Rehearsal and performance of students' original works and
2. Orchestration education.

In considering both the design of the School and practices observed in the School, two overarching teaching strategies were identified:

1. Immersion in an orchestral environment

2. Mentoring by expert composer-teachers

As mentors, composer-teachers provided modeling, interpretation, explicating standards, problem-finding, possibility-generation, promisingness sharing, and invitations to greater participation in the wider composer community.

Composer-students reported changed perceptions of the orchestra and of orchestral composition, and resolutions to take greater care with details in notated presentation. Composer-teacher and orchestral player feedback was often direct and critical. Some students experienced feelings of discouragement, yet all appreciated the feedback and have persisted in composing for orchestra.

Orchestral composition requires extensive knowledge of instrumentation, historical repertoire and contemporary orchestral culture. Mentored practical experience in an orchestral professional performance environment enables composers to assimilate necessary aspects of orchestral culture to better inform their creative work away from the orchestra, and to maximise possibilities for creative collaboration with expert performers within the cultural constraints.

This study recommends the incorporation of genre-specific music cultural education and immersion in authentic professional contexts into composition teaching. It also recommends further investigation into the process of acquiring expertise through workshops with professional performance communities, research identifying signature pedagogies of different musical practices, and ways musical practices may inform the most effective pedagogies.

In conclusion

By means of mentored immersion in this professional orchestral workplace, composer-students gained expertise-developing experience resulting in changed and refined conceptions of orchestral composing. The composer, rarely a regular member of an orchestral community, must write in the language of that community, respecting its standards of clarity and detail. Through this immersion and supported by experienced composer-teachers, these students were able to experience how their ideas (conceived, captured, and constructed away from the orchestra) work in light of real constraints and possibilities. Composer-teachers stood back enough that students would experience the situation intensely, then provided interpretations of orchestral culture, identified problems in student works, and engaged in joint problem-solving. The final performances were the product of a collaboration between participants representing a diverse range of expertise (conductor, performers and composer), negotiated in notation and sound. Composer-students left the school with an expanded understanding of the orchestra: from merely a wide array of timbres to a community of expert performers who can contribute powerfully to the work; moving toward understanding that they are part of a collaboration. Expertly-guided immersive experience in authentic environments will benefit emerging composers of all genres.

You, the participants in the study have our deepest gratitude for generously sharing your time, stories, and insights. Thank you to the Orchestra and the Composers' School for access to a marvelous learning opportunity.

Publications and presentations to date:

- Love, K.G. (2014). *Composer development: Learning from performance and performers*. (doctoral dissertation). University of Queensland, Brisbane, QLD.
- Love, K.G., & Barrett, M.S. (2011). *The first rehearsal: Hearing from initial encounters of emerging hearing from initial encounters of emerging composers with a professional orchestra*. Paper presented at 'Power of Music' - the 34th National Conference of the Musicological Society of Australia and the 2nd International Conference on Music and Emotion. Perth, WA. Dec. 2011.
- Love, K.G., & Barrett, M.S. (2012). *Sharing promisingness: Teaching and learning relationships between emerging and eminent composers in an orchestral composers school*. Paper presented at the 24th ISME Research Commission, Thessaloniki, Greece.
http://issuu.com/official_isme/docs/2012_research_proceedings p. 126-35.
- Love, K.G., & Barrett, M.S. (2014). Learning to collaborate in code: Negotiating the score in a symphony orchestra composers' school. In M. S. Barrett (Ed.), *Collaborative creative thought and practice in music*. Surrey, UK: Ashgate, pp. 49-64.
- Love, K.G. (2014). *Collaborating in code: Composers and performers negotiating the score*. Presentation for Musicological Society of Australia, Tasmanian Chapter. May, 2014.
- Love, K.G., & Barrett, M.S. (2014). Risky apprenticeships: a case study of “signature pedagogies” in an orchestral composers’ school. *Proceedings of the 25th International Seminar of the ISME Commission on Research*. Federal University of Paraíba, João Pessoa, Paraíba, Brazil, July 2014, p. 209-28.
http://issuu.com/official_isme/docs/2014_11_10_isme_rc_ebook_final_pp37/1
- Love, K.G. (2014). *Colaboración en código: Cómo aprende el compositor a comunicarse con la orquesta*. Paper presented for the Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua, Faculty of Arts Webinar series. Patricia Gonzáles-Moreno, coordinator. September, 2014.
- Love, K.G., & Barrett, M.S. (accepted). A case study of teaching and learning strategies in an orchestral composition masterclass. *Psychology of Music*.

Note: The full dissertation is available as a digital document through the University of Queensland library. If you cannot access it that way and would like to read it, please contact me and I will send the file.

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Contact details for correspondence

Dr. Karlin Love
School of Music, University of Queensland
karlin.love@uqconnect.edu.au
+61 434 810628