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The present and future of doctoral training in music composition in the UK

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Research Domains

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

Abstract

This paper explores the current state and future of doctoral research in music composition. With reference to the authors' recent chapter/dataset on this issue (Leedham and Scheuregger 2020), we present an overview of our findings, with a particular focus on how developments in understandings of practice research (P-R) might lead to new and better practices in the sector. Although composition research is well established in the UK, our data show that doctoral programmes may not be equipping students with the most appropriate skills or adequate understandings of P-R methodologies. We suggest that rethinking supervisory roles and enhanced training may be needed in the sector. Doctoral programmes may also benefit from some redesign to better frame them as either focusing on research through composition or training in composition.

Full paper

This paper explores the current state and future of doctoral research in music composition. With reference to the authors' recent chapter/dataset on this issue (Leedham and Scheuregger 2020), we present an overview of our findings, with a particular focus on how developments in understandings of practice research (P-R) might

lead to new and better practices in the sector.

Doctoral study in music composition is long established as a form of research in the UK, with the University of Oxford awarding DMus degrees in composition as early as 1511. The modern composition PhD – usually consisting of a portfolio of works plus a written component – was established in the 1970s, at the universities of York and Durham (Archbold 2016). In the last decade, there have been debates around the relationship between composition and research, and how creative practice can meaningfully be research. We outline these in detail in our chapter, but suffice to say there are strongly held views in different camps: the important issues here, are (1) the purpose of verbal writing in such research, (2) the question of research degree versus composer apprenticeship, and (3) the supervisors' role in the PhD.

The survey that informs the discussion below was conducted anonymously online between 23 July 2018 and 31 December 2018 and canvassed views from current and former PhD candidates at UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). There were 102 responses across 41 unique HEIs. We present some key data below, offering brief commentary on the findings.

As we have outlined elsewhere (Leedham and Scheuregger 2020), it is established good practice for those conducting doctoral research involving artistic/practical work to write throughout the process (c.f. Barrett 2007; Nelson 2013). However, only 22% of respondents report doing this, with over half writing much later (Fig. 1). Furthermore, the proportion of respondents rating various elements in terms of importance shows a disconnect between good practice and the reality for PhD composers (Fig. 2). Few consider reflective elements to be important and respondents tend to focus either on either technical areas (the 'how' of their compositional processes) or conceptual/aesthetic context (the 'why'). Again, good practice tells us that reflection, technique and context should all feature in complementary writing about practice (Nelson 2006, 2013).

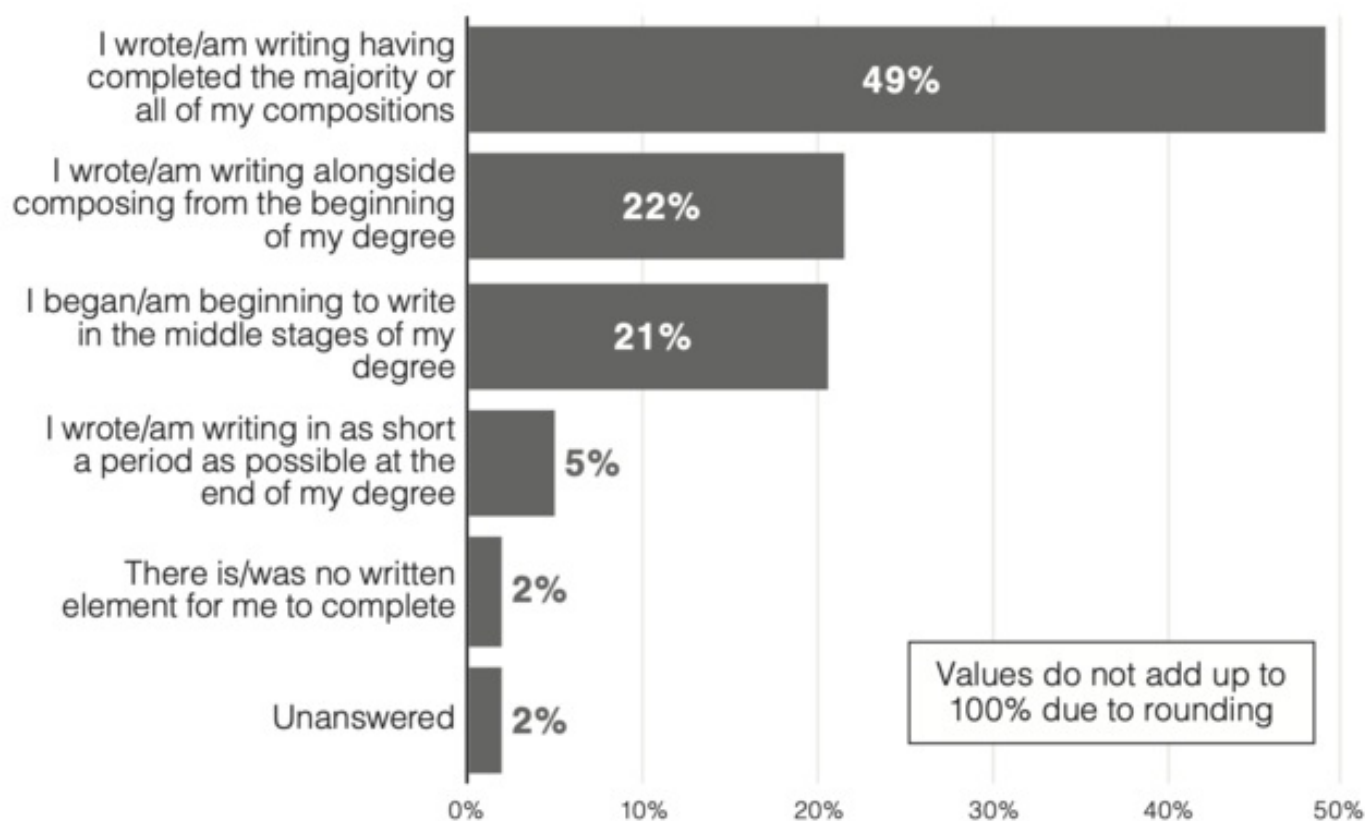


Figure 1: Timing of writing

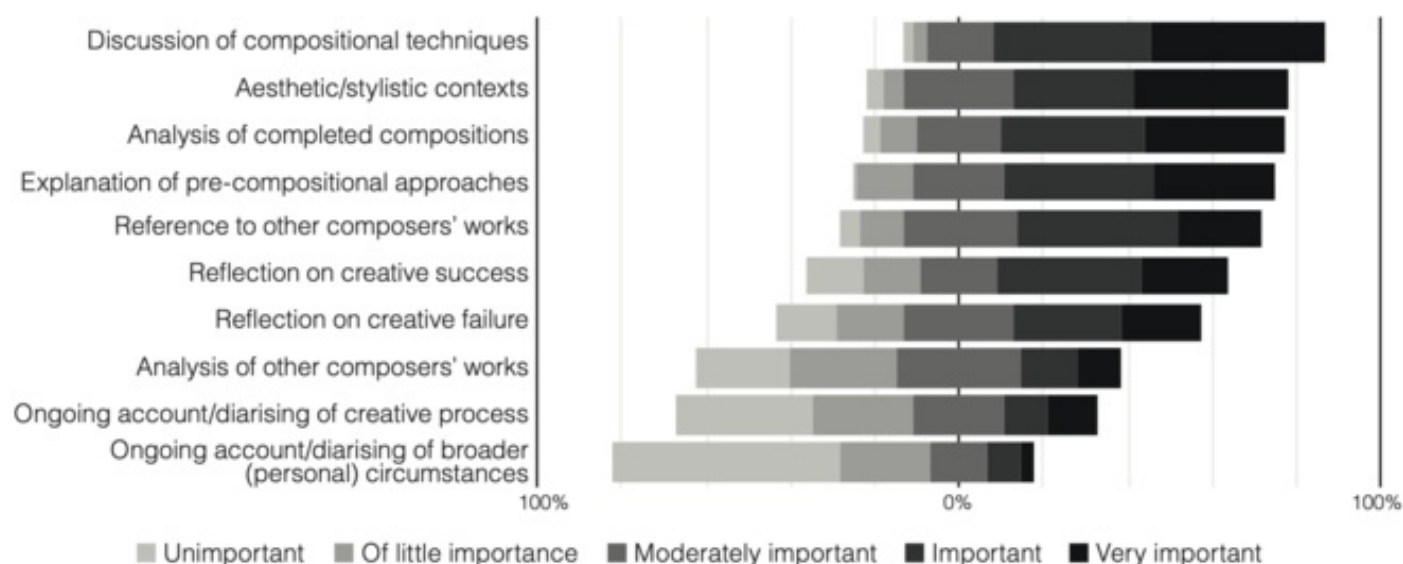


Figure 2: Content of written element

This sense that composition PhDs do not fully engage with established P-R methodologies is born out in the c.15,000 words of qualitative responses to the survey: there is a clear disconnect between composition research and other areas of P-R, indicating a lack of appropriate training, supervision and/or PhD programme design. Respondents' approaches can be categorised in the model below (Fig. 3). We found the majority to be in the uppermost categories, few to be reflective, and fewer still to reflect the importance of combining areas to create evidence-based reflexive writing that is located in both literature and practice.

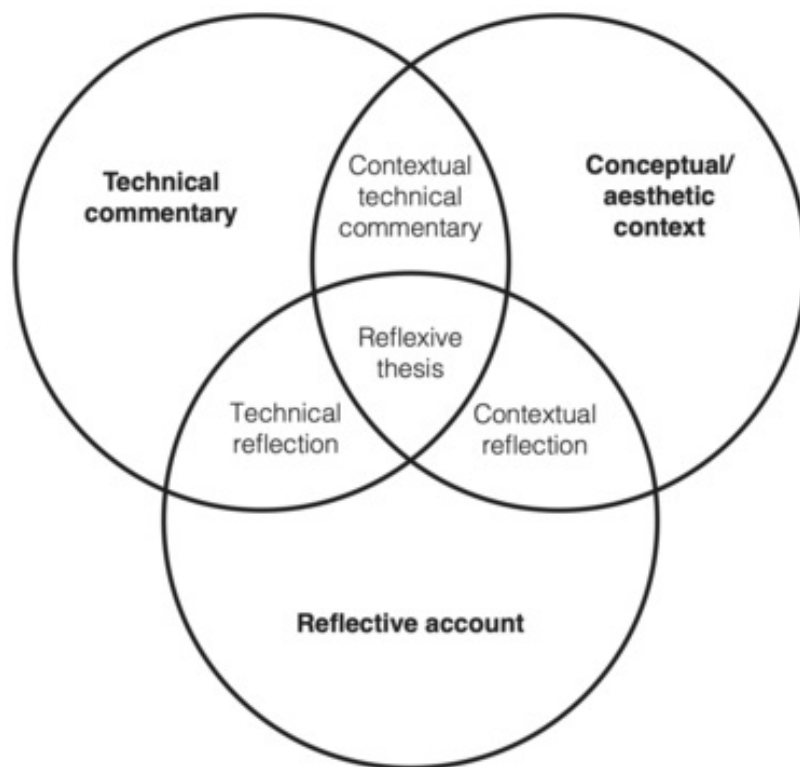


Figure 3: Types of commentary

An important takeaway is the role of the supervisor(s). Respondents are clear that the supervisor is the main influence on the written element and, by extension, the research process (as it relates to context, literature and non-practical elements), as Fig. 4 shows. A common model for composition PhDs is for one composer to supervise the candidate, in a master-apprentice model. This often leads to a lack of expertise in areas beyond the act of composing, leading to work which may lack a serious research basis. More work is needed to accurately map current practice in the sector in this regard, but we tentatively propose that a shift towards multi-

disciplinary supervisory teams is needed: composers need to learn not just from composers.

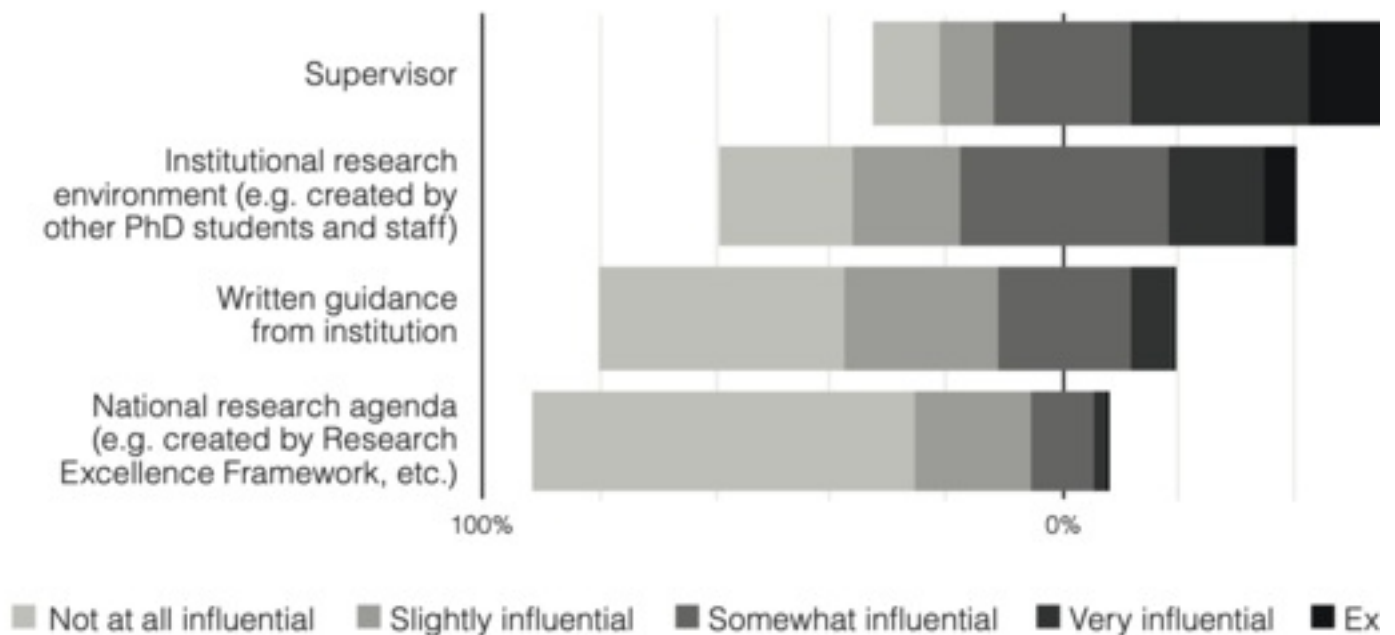


Figure 4: Influencing factors on the written element

We also see that further work is needed to establish whether a division between composition doctorates with a research focus and those with a practice focus would be useful. Following some other disciplines and countries, there may be value in HEIs offering a DMus for a creative composition portfolio, following a practice-focused apprenticeship model, as well as PhD awards for composition research with a specific research enquiry. More broadly, a greater awareness of the national research context is needed, as is a far greater emphasis on P-R methodologies.

How our data can inform changes in doctoral teaching in learning is the important next step in our research, and we are keen to hear view from colleagues working across the SRHE on how we might take this forward.

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