

‘Feeding back’ in musical performance: exploring feedback practice in relation to students’ and tutors’ learning and teaching experience.

Presentation of Research Findings

Maria Krivenski
Music Department
Goldsmiths, University of London

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Introduction

The impetus for this research came from my concerns regarding current feedback practices in musical performance. As an instrumental and performance tutor at a University Music Department, I had become increasingly aware of unresolved issues related to the feedback process. I would regularly come across students who experienced the feedback received in the contexts of performance modules as confusing or unhelpful; in some cases, feedback appeared to affect negatively performance students' motivation and self-belief (cf. Rowe *et al.*, 2010; Higgins *et al.*, 2002). Furthermore, initial analysis of fieldnotes and semi-structured interviews from research for my ongoing PhD, *The Place of Musical Performance in Higher Education*, revealed that negative perceptions and experiences of feedback were widespread among both performance students and instrumental tutors.

Although research studies have stressed the centrality of feedback to students' learning process and their growth as self-regulated learners (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Duncan *et al.*, 2003 2004), 'feedback is still relatively underexplored' (Careless, 2006: 220), particularly in the context of musical performance in higher education, where research focus has been placed mostly on issues surrounding assessment methods (Monks, 2009; Ginsborg & Wistreich, 2007; Hunter, 2006; Daniel, 2004; Stanley *et al.*, 2002; Hargreaves *et al.*, 2002).

Studies on one-to-one instrumental and vocal lessons in university and conservatoire sectors (Gaunt, 2011, 2009 & 2008; Zhukov, 2008; Burwell, 2005; Presland, 2005; Young *et al.*, 2003) have confirmed the key role of feedback, and have provided some valuable insights on feedback issues in this specific setting. However, they have not considered musical performance from the perspective of the wider learning and assessment context of a performance module or music degree, that is, as a holistic experience that embraces the studio lesson as well as the more public environment of the group class, the performance seminar, the masterclass and the performance exam (cf. Burwell, 2005: 199; Gaunt, 2008: 236).

Research Aims and Methods

The broadest aim of this project was to gain an in-depth understanding of the feedback process in musical performance and related issues through a qualitative case study that focused on the undergraduate performance modules available to students on a classical pathway at a University Music Department. Rather than privileging one specific teaching/learning or assessment setting, the study aimed to look at feedback as a network of practices spread through all the different contexts of

the modules and, thus, to present a multidimensional view of the feedback process in the light of the different perspectives offered by members of the Music Department's 'performance community': performance students, instrumental tutors¹, academic tutors with a leading, teaching and/or assessing role in the modules and freelancing support members². In doing so, the project also responded to the need highlighted by existing literature on feedback in higher education: to research into, and compare, students' and staff perceptions of feedback (Rowe *et al.*, 2010: 220) and to 'develop a better understanding of the student–feedback and student–tutor relationships' (Higgins *et al.*, 2002: 62).

More specifically, the project's objectives were to:

- explore current feedback strategies, with particular attention to the multi-contextual nature of performance courses and its implications for the learning, teaching and assessment process;
- investigate factors which affect students' and tutors' perception of, and engagement with, feedback;
- identify and explore issues experienced in feedback practices by students and tutors;
- provide a platform for further research into strategies to improve existing feedback practices and ways to implement them.

The project spanned five academic terms (over three consecutive academic years) and consisted of two data-collection stages. In the first stage, participants took part in focus groups in which they were encouraged to discuss and reflect on their experiences of feedback; the open-ended questions that were used in the routes were informed by the initial findings of my PhD research. In the second stage, the themes that had emerged in the course of the focus groups were explored through semi-structured interviews. Data collection was interspersed with analysis to allow the latter to guide the study according to the principles of theoretical sampling in grounded theory research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Charmaz, 2006). Transcripts of the focus groups and interviews were analysed using QSR NVivo software (version 9.2).

Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis and were introduced to the project's rationale, aims and research methods through an electronic document which was sent to all members of the Music Department's 'performance community' at the beginning of each stage of the project. The criterion used to select participants among the volunteers was to insure a broad representation of the

¹ In this report, I use the term 'instrumental' to refer to both vocal and instrumental specialisms.

² Professional pianists with the role of 'accompanists' in classes and exams.

performance specialisms present at all three levels of the undergraduate performance modules.³ Written consent to use participants' anonymised responses in the public dissemination of the findings was sought at each stage. Participants were given the opportunity to read and comment on the final draft of the findings reported here.

My role as both instrumental and academic tutor in the Music Department means that my position in the research field was that of an 'insider', that is, 'an individual who possesses a priori intimate knowledge of the community and its members' (Hellawell, 2006). This position presented both advantages and challenges: on the one hand, it made it easier to reach out to potential participants and explain the rationale of the project effectively by referring to common experiences; during the course of the research, it enabled me to empathise with the participants and build a relationship of trust with them; on the other hand, being an 'insider' required a conscious effort to 'distance' myself from the participants' narratives as well as identify my own position, values and beliefs in respect to the topics discussed – through the use of reflexive memoing – in order to create the necessary 'analytic space' to view the data collected from a critical perspective (cf. Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 90).

Presenting the case study: The undergraduate classical performance modules in a University Music Department

Classical performance is one of the 'pathways' music students can choose to take in the BMus programme. Students who take this pathway have a wide range of instrumental skills and performance experience, especially when compared to students taking performance in the Conservatoire sector (cf. Burwell, 2005: 201).

Musical performance modules are one-year long and progress from Levels 1 to 3: Level 1 lays the foundation of solo and ensemble classical performance skills and knowledge and Levels 2 and 3 develop them to a more advanced standard. Level 1 musical performance is mandatory for all first-year students, whereas at Levels 2 and 3 musical performance is elective.

Module delivery

At all three Levels, students receive both one-to-one tuition (instrumental lessons) and group performance classes (Performance Seminars and Ensemble Coachings). Third-year performance students also receive a one-off Master Class with an external tutor.

³ The tables in Appendix 1 (p.36) provide details on students' specialisms over the two academic years in which the data collection took place. Due to the relatively small number of instrumental tutors in the Music Department, details of tutors' specialisms have not been provided in order to protect participants' anonymity.

One-to-one tuition is delivered by staff who are instrumental specialists and have a background as professional performers; these members of staff are contracted on an hourly basis and are referred to as ‘Visiting Tutors’ (VTs). The number of contact hours with specialist VTs increases as students progress through the degree.⁴ Instrumental VTs are generally not involved in the design or management of the Performance modules (cf. Venn, 2010; Burwell, 2005) and, because of the nature of instrumental one-to-one tuition, they work in relative isolation ‘with little connection to a student’s other learning experiences and teachers’ (Gaunt, 2011: 177).

Group sessions are generally delivered by the module leader (an academic tutor with a background as a professional performer) and, occasionally, by instrumental VTs. As for the Master Classes, they are generally given by a professional performer whose first instrument is the same as the students’; however, the match between students’ and tutors’ specialism occurs only in cases in which student numbers in relation to a specific instrument are (relatively) high; if numbers are low, students are more likely to be grouped together by instrumental family and attend a more ‘general’ Master Class with a professional performer who specialises in one instrument from the same family (e.g. a clarinetist for all wind instruments).

Assessment

Performance students have three summative assessments per academic year: two that focus on solo skills (mid-course assessment and final recital) and one on ensemble skills. Typically, the module leader co-examines the first two assessments (one solo, one ensemble) with either another academic member of staff or with an instrumental VT; external tutors (with a background as professional performers) are invited to co-examine final recitals: as in the case of the Master Classes, these examiners might be a specialist in the instrument examined or not, depending on student numbers. Third-year students have the opportunity to do a mock-recital in front of the module leader before their final exam.

Feedback contexts

The Performance modules are designed to incorporate opportunities for formative feedback from VTs, module leaders and peers in the context of one-to-one and group classes. This type of feedback is generally delivered orally and is not officially documented, with the only exception being third-year ‘mock recitals’ for which students receive written formative feedback from their module leader.

⁴ At the moment of writing, and while the research was being carried out, the instrumental tuition allowance is as follows: 12 hours for L1 performance students; 14 hours for L2 performance students; 17 hours for L3 performance students.

Instrumental VTs are implicitly expected to give ‘ongoing, extensive and detailed’ formative feedback to their students (Young, 2008: 12) in the context of one-to-one lessons, although they are not asked to follow any specific or official feedback guidelines. Peer feedback is central to group classes such as Performance Seminars and is guided, and to some extent supplemented, by the tutor leading the class. As part of their coursework, performance students are also asked to give some peer feedback in a written, formal format (‘Peer Feedback on Musical Performance’ and ‘Concert Reviews’), following specific feedback criteria to which they are introduced in the course of the modules.

Summative feedback is delivered through end-of-year Instrumental Reports and Structured Feedback Forms (SFFs).⁵ Instrumental Reports are structured so as to elicit feedback (from instrumental VTs) on students’ responsiveness during one-to-one lessons and progress throughout the academic year. SFFs are written by internal and/or external examiners in the context of students’ solo and ensemble assessed recitals. The SFFs refer to the grading criteria used for musical performance assessments⁶ and invite the examiners to offer explicit feedforward, that is, practical advice or suggestions on how students can improve specific aspects of their performance, as well as summative feedback.

Findings

Although the main themes that emerged from this study overlap, connect and intersect in many ways, I present them here in three separate groups, for the purpose of clarity. Each group answers a specific research question:

1. What are the feedback strategies used in teaching and assessment contexts?
2. What are the factors that influence students’ and tutors’ perception of and engagement with feedback?
3. What changes have students and tutors suggested to the current feedback system?

1. What are the feedback strategies used in teaching and assessment contexts?

Numerous feedback strategies were discussed by participants; these varied according to the context in which feedback was given and the individuals involved in the process. They can, however,

⁵ Please see Appendix 3 for an example of SFFs.

⁶ This is achieved through the explicit use of the performance categories onto which criteria are built: technical abilities, understanding of the piece as a whole, stylistic awareness, approach to music and presentation.

be summarised in three broad categories: ‘providing balanced feedback’, ‘developing students’ critical skills’ and ‘approaching students as individuals’.

1.1. Providing balanced feedback

Students and tutors generally stressed the importance of receiving and giving ‘balanced’ feedback, that is, feedback that did not focus exclusively on ‘what is wrong’, but that also spelt out what a student had ‘done well’. Participants reported that this balance was difficult to achieve and feedback in both learning and assessment contexts would often be weighted either towards criticism or towards praise. Interestingly, one academic tutor did not agree with the view that ‘balanced’ feedback was the best approach for students’ growth; in contrast to most participants’ opinion, he expressed the belief that ‘positive feedback was, in most cases, a waste of time’:

I try to be as critical as possible [...] we all develop because of certain obstacles and restrictions so it’s good to have obstacles, it’s good to be criticized.

When discussing the balance between praise and criticism in feedback strategies, participants mostly focused on the contexts of one-to-one lessons, Instrumental Reports and examinations.

Although some students spoke of how their instrumental tutors were ‘good at picking out the good points’ in their performances, others stressed the fact they did not receive sufficient ‘encouragement’ in the context of one-to-one and lessons; feedback in these contexts was perceived as being mostly (constructive) criticism. Some students reported that their tutors would introduce more positive feedback only towards the end of the academic year.

The Instrumental Reports that students receive at the end of the academic year are the only written feedback that instrumental tutors give to their students. Opinion on the usefulness of this type of feedback was divided among members of staff: a few tutors experienced it mostly as an administrative task (cf. Pitts, 2005: 226); some talked of a ‘protective element’ that the Instrumental reports could provide to instrumental tutors:

[The content of the Instrumental Report] is what I feel has happened this year with this student. So if there’s any comeback from them, or, you know, if they erm, you know, they’re unhappy about something, there might be something in a report that, that is erm, can be referred to.

Most instrumental tutors, however, experienced these Reports as an opportunity to show students ‘the bigger picture’ and highlight their achievements, as well as suggest the way forward. Students stated that, overall, feedback received in Instrumental Reports would help them gain a more balanced view of their overall progress throughout the academic year and, for this reason, it

would boost their confidence as performers; as such, they considered these reports a very valuable source of feedback. Interestingly, the majority of academic tutors did not see any real value in Instrumental Reports; they stated that ‘the only reason for [having them] is the fact that the [instrumental] teacher isn’t present, at the exam’; a tutor added: ‘I think they should be scrapped [...] I think they waste time and effort’

Commenting on the summative feedback received by students in Structured Feedback Forms, instrumental tutors expressed the view that examiners did not always achieve well-balanced feedback, but tended to focus mostly on the negative aspects of students’ performances, to the point that the feedback students had received did not support the mark they had been awarded; a tutor illustrated this with a specific example drawn from a SFF a student had recently received:

[The feedback] was critical, but then the mark was quite good: it was in the first category; and I have to say, if I hadn’t seen a mark and I’d read this feedback, I wouldn’t have put the mark where it was.

1.2. Developing students’ critical skills

The following statement is representative of instrumental and academic tutors’ experience in relation to the majority of performance students’ critical skills:

Students are not self-critically aware: they’re not questioning themselves enough; they’re not really being objective about what they can do and what they can’t.

Tutors were very aware of the need to encourage students to ‘think for themselves’ and make their own informed choices. Consequently, when feeding back to students, tutors would try to use strategies that discouraged them from being like ‘parrots’ – that is, ‘picking up, copying it, then forgetting’. From tutors’ (and, to some extent, students’) discussions, three main feedback approaches emerged related to the development of students’ critical skills: self-feedback, peer feedback and active learning.

1.2.1. *Inviting students to self-feedback*

One of tutors’ top priorities, particularly in the context of one-to-one lessons, was to encourage students to be more self-aware and think critically; instrumental tutors described how they would try to put across the message ‘your ears are your best teachers!’ in as many different ways as possible. For example, they would ask students to give their own opinion about their own playing during the lessons *before* giving them any feedback; this way, students could get ‘into the habit of listening to what they’re doing, because I think nine times out of ten that’s where they go

wrong.’ Another approach would be to invite students to self-feedback by getting them to imagine they were teaching themselves: ‘if you have to be now in my position, what would you criticise?’

Recording oneself was also highlighted as a way of developing self-critical skills: a tutor, for example, encouraged students to record themselves and,

get some objectivity about their own sense of tempo or own sense of balance – they might not have thought about it or how you achieve that – and then go out and find the process by which a) you discover what you’re doing and b) you discover how to change it, which is often, once you’ve discovered it, that often leads into how to do it.

A few students reported audio or video recording themselves during lessons, seminars and practice sessions; they explained that listening to and/or watching themselves helped them gain a more objective view of ‘where they were at’ and make further progress by ‘build[ing] on that’. This approach to self-feedback was, however, more an exception than the rule among performance students.

1.2.2. Developing students’ peer feedback skills

Most participants stressed the fact that the ability to feedback to peers was fundamental to the development of students’ critical skills, but very few strategies as to how to nurture and guide peer feedback skills were discussed during this study.

An academic tutor explained that, in the context of group classes, members of staff took the role of ‘facilitators of critical discussions’ in order to encourage peer feedback. In this context it was vital to get ‘group feedback dynamic going’ and be aware of the fact that,

some people feel too shy or too insecure to be contributing and the loudmouths [...] take over.

Another academic tutor spoke of how he welcomed ‘controversial’ and ‘provocative’ comments that pushed students beyond the ‘very narrow range of clichés’ they tended to use when commenting on someone else’s performance – clichés such as feedback on dynamic ranges, articulation markings and the ‘exact’ reading of the score. In his view, encouraging students to go beyond this type of feeding back fostered both critical and creative skills in performance students.

Students’ experience of peer feedback in the context of group classes was mixed. In some cases, being asked to give feedback in this situation was experienced as a positive challenge that stimulated the development of one’s critical skills:

You hear lots of opinions and people are forced to think of something else other than what the person before said, so you get people really thinking in depth about your playing.

Some students, however, expressed the view that the method of ‘forcing’ students to give feedback (‘sometimes they just point at you: “say something”’) felt like being in ‘primary school’ and was not experienced as a useful learning experience; a participant added that occasionally students, including himself, simply might not have ‘anything to say’ about a peer’s performance and the method of asking every single student to offer their feedback could lead to people ‘forcing ideas’ in their effort to contribute to the ongoing discussion.

Instrumental tutors’ view of peer feedback in the context of group classes was also mixed; some did not believe that ‘challenging students to comment [...] so that they learn to criticise themselves’ was that ‘valuable’ an experience. A tutor clarified that ‘what is valuable [in this context] is really to stand up on the stage and play in front of people.’ Another instrumental tutor who had led several seminar sessions objected to this view and highlighted how peer feedback could constitute a very positive learning experience; the stress, however, was not so much on the development of students’ critical skills, as on the fact that performers would find their peers’ ‘general’ comments useful:

I get them all to give feedback too ‘cause they can all give, a general thing too and I find that works really quite well, getting them to talk about it, and I found the students really benefited quite considerably from what all their peers had to say.

In terms of one-to-one lessons, it emerged that peer feedback was very rare and only one instrumental tutor spoke of facilitating it: he would use the overlap between two lessons (designed into his teaching timetable) so that students would have the opportunity to ‘give feedback to each other in a sort of performance situation.’

Some third-year students spoke of rehearsals in preparation for assessed ensemble projects as excellent contexts for developing their feedback skills. The fact that they were working without a tutor meant that during rehearsals they would have to try and ‘lead each other’; this encouraged them to ‘pull out of themselves’ rehearsal techniques they had learnt in various learning contexts over the years (such as orchestra rehearsals) and apply them in the context of their ensemble rehearsals through the use of peer feedback.

1.2.3. Actively involving students in the learning process

Instrumental tutors reported using feedback approaches that would encourage students to be more aware of their learning process and take the initiative, rather than passively waiting ‘to be told what to do’.

Some tutors reported that an approach they would take in one-to-one lessons would be to invite students to explore the interpretative side of their playing without much direction from their tutor. A tutor explained: ‘I would really hold back from specifically telling them how to do something’ and get them to ‘try different things and make their own decision’; in some tutors’ view, this approach was the only way to ‘challenge students’ thinking and imagination’.

Students’ comments revealed that this approach could be misinterpreted and lead some students to believe their tutors simply did not focus on interpretation:

My lessons have been nearly all technique, like [my instrumental tutor] doesn't really say much about musicality I think.

It also became apparent that the lack of feedback on interpretation during one-to-one lessons could, in fact, leave students unprepared to deal with this kind of feedback in different contexts. The same student shared the following experience, in the context of an ensemble coaching session:

[The tutor] was just saying that it needs to be less fat, more as if it feels as if it's one and it just- but it just felt like whatever I did it wasn't quite right and then it was like, it was too plonky or too kind of, not smooth or not together as a phrase; and it just felt like, well, it's just what I'm doing isn't- doesn't seem to be conceived as musical.

Another ‘active learning’ approach that instrumental tutors discussed was encouraging a reflective attitude in their students: tutors would ask students to be critical about their own instrumental learning process in general and analyse the work done in between lessons. Asking questions such as ‘where are you aiming for?’ and ‘how much input do you want from me?’ would invite students to start this process:

I'll be very much encouraging them to state where they're at with their, their learning problems or their solutions and work with that.

When both parties were open to this approach, the responsibility for the feedback (and learning) process could be shared by both tutor and student, with clear benefits to the

development of students' critical skills. In some cases, however, students would try and initiate this approach during lessons, but tutors would resist it:

I took it to my teacher and said 'I'm not very good at this, can we work on this,' which he never did: he just like bypassed it.

1.3. Approaching students as individuals

When asked to describe their general approach to feedback in a teaching/learning context, most tutors replied that it would be difficult to find an answer that applied to all cases because they tended to adapt their feedback style to suit individual students. In their view, 'an understanding of the student' was fundamental and whenever feeding back it was necessary to 'take account of the human being who's performing'. A tutor stressed that in any teaching/learning situation it was fundamental to

assume nothing and see the student in front of you.

Some instrumental tutors explained that thinking of the individual student had clear implications for the way in which feedback was delivered and pitched to students:

The way you feed back to some students can be a little harsher; some people respond to that better than others.

And,

if you have a student who reacts very badly to criticism, then perhaps you need to capture things in a way that's gonna be positive.

In other words, it was important to challenge students and push them beyond their comfort zone, but always in ways that would take into account students' psychoemotional well-being. An instrumental tutor gave an example of the challenges that this approach implied: when commenting on students' interpretation, feedback had to be carefully pitched so as not to 'kill their inspiration and their sense of adventure [...] even if they've slightly overstepped the mark stylistically'; at the same time, students' creative skills had to be 'harnessed' so that their interpretations would not get 'out of control'.

Some tutors, however, clarified that this flexibility of approach had to be considered within the specific boundaries of the individual's 'temperament' and identity as a teacher: in the words of a participant, it would be 'wrong to pretend that you're something else.' Instrumental tutors, in particular, stated that it was important for them to acknowledge the fact that 'one is not perfect for

everybody' and that students who decided to study with a particular tutor had to 'be prepared to take onboard how they teach.' A participant illustrated this point through the following comment:

I'm not gonna be the ideal teacher for every single person that comes through my door, erm and just [have] to accept some people need a different approach.

Comments that students made about their experience of different feedback approaches in the modules revealed the fact that, in many cases, it had been necessary for students to adapt to the individual delivery style of their tutors, in both one-to-one and group contexts. When a tutor's approach to feedback was experienced as challenging, most students reported they would try to understand the reasons behind it and/or cope with it rather than negotiate a different approach:

Having someone [laughs] er yeah, giving you not so encouraging feedback I did find quite difficult to deal with [...] I took it very personally to begin with and then realising that it wasn't actually a personal attack at all, it was obviously just how [the tutor] related to everyone [...] it took a while to adjust to it.

[The tutor] can be quite like, harsh and really abusive, and it's just like, that doesn't help [...] This isn't really good 'cause I think it's affecting my performance, but I think I'm so used to [the tutor] abusing me [laughs] it's really bad: I'm so used to the abuse, I'm just like, 'oh no, that's fine'.

Some students expressed concern about initiating a dialogue with their one-to-one or performance tutors about feedback delivery style because this act could be misinterpreted as a challenge to the tutor's authority or lack of faith in their expertise. A student reflected on this situation:

I would just worry about erm questioning [the tutor's] approaches, you know, I wouldn't want to ever suggest that I thought it was, you know, not a good way to teach at all because obviously [the tutor] does get results, erm it's just, I don't know, maybe it would be an idea to question the way I react to what [the tutor] is telling me.

In cases in which a student was not able to adapt to her/his tutor's feedback style s/he would either change tutor – if the main difficulties were experienced in a one-to-one context – or, if the overall performance experience had been 'poisoned' by one or more negative experiences and/or relationships the student would give up performance altogether.

1.4. Effects of ‘time constraints’ on feedback strategies

In the course of discussions about feedback strategies it emerged that – regardless of the approach tutors would consider appropriate for a specific student in an ideal situation – the ‘time constraints’ experienced in the context of the performance modules could have some undesired effects on feedback approaches.

Most instrumental tutors shared the fact this was a major issue for them and identified the number of one-to-one lessons given to students during the academic year⁷ and the length of lessons as two factors which could seriously affect their feedback strategies in the context of one-to-one lessons. They explained how ‘wanting to get quick results because time is so short, the lessons are very few,’ they would sometimes end up ‘pushing’ students excessively; as a tutor pointed out, ‘it’s not like a music college where you’ve actually time to coax them along.’ Tutors shared the feeling that ‘it’s very difficult to work under these circumstances, and to achieve any result.’ They were also very much aware of the fact that pushing students who are ‘over-sensitive’ or who cannot ‘cope’ with the extra pressure could do more ‘damage’ than good: it could make it more difficult for students to achieve good results and, in some cases, it could even ‘poison’ students’ overall performance experience.

Tutors felt that time constraints made it ‘very difficult sometimes to give anything that’s meaningful enough’ to the students. Limited time also meant the need to prioritise some aspects of performance over others when feeding back to students, simply because there would be no time to cover everything during lessons; as a result, students could end up being left ‘to their own devices just to get on with it’. For example: several students reported that there was no time for them to receive feedback from their tutors on chamber music they were preparing for assessed ensemble recitals because the focus of the lessons was on solo repertoire. On a similar note, a tutor shared the fact that,

you haven’t got the luxury of having an hour on just so called technique or just basic things, you know, you’ve got to leave that to [the students].

2. What are the factors that influence students’ and tutors’ perception of and engagement with feedback?

The findings in this study revealed that the perception of, and engagement with, feedback on musical performance are mediated by multiple factors and, thus, support the view that the process of giving and receiving feedback is more complex than generally acknowledged (cf. Careless, 2006) and

⁷ An instrumental tutor commenting on this issue, said that when comparing one-to-one instrumental lessons in the University sector to those in the Conservatoire sector ‘the big difference is in terms of delivering one-to-one tuition’: ‘at a conservatoire level a first year undergraduate would get, I think something like 30 or 33 hours one to one tuition a year. And we get 12 [laughs]. I don’t need to say anything else, do I?’

that feedback should be viewed as a ‘particularly complex and problematic form of communication’ (Higgins, 2000: 2). These mediating factors are examined in the following sections, grouped in three main categories: the musical identities of the givers/receivers of feedback; the perceived objectivity/subjectivity of feedback content; and the context in which feedback is given/received.

2.1. Tutors’ and students’ musical identity

The musical identity of those providing and receiving feedback emerged as a recurring theme in participants’ discussions on their feedback experiences. The identity attributes that were put forward by the participants as particularly significant were: specialism (performer vs. academic), membership of a performance community and students’ self-perceptions as performers. These attributes were considered in relation to the perception of feedback as valuable or ‘helpful’, and to participants’ engagement with feedback.

2.1.1. *Specialist vs. non-specialist feedback*

Participants flagged up the fact that in teaching and assessment contexts, students might not always receive feedback from a specialist tutor/examiner, that is, a performer whose main instrument was the same instrument as the students’; for logistical reasons, non-specialist performers might in some cases lead group classes, Master Classes and/or examine performance examinations. This state of affairs was generally viewed as problematic.

Some students and most instrumental tutors stated that they valued specialist over non-specialist feedback at all times because of the perceived ability of specialists to give detailed feedback and feedforward on both technical and musical aspects of a performance. The remaining participants, including all academic tutors, described both types of feedback as important; they valued non-specialist feedback because of its focus on ‘performance as a whole’ and on ‘general musicality’, rather than on specific technical details: this was seen to help students gain different perspectives of their playing and singing, which, in turn, could lead them to a deeper engagement with the music performed, as their focus was redirected away from technical issues to interpretative ones.

In the context of peer feedback, students’ opinion about specialist feedback was divided; some students felt that the lack of specialist knowledge would prevent them from giving meaningful feedback to their peers:

I still kind of feel that giving feedback to, like for me to give feedback to a brass player, isn't going to be valuable because I don't know anything about playing a brass instrument you know. I can give maybe a bit of, you know, musical faults or whatever but actually ... if it doesn't sound good I can't say why; and it's like how do I know whether it sounds good or not anyway?

Other students pointed out that specialist feedback in this context could at times turn out to be ‘biased’ – and therefore less helpful – in the sense that a peer playing the same instrument would know how difficult a particular passage was and, therefore, might empathise with the student and be more ‘forgiving’ if s/he could not play it well; this could lead the peer to think,

Oh that’s a very difficult passage so maybe I will not comment on that because it’s just technique.

2.1.2. Academic vs. instrumental tutors’ feedback

Participants expressed strong beliefs regarding the value of feedback given to performance students by academic members of staff, rather than by instrumental specialists, particularly in relation to summative contexts. The view that academic tutors who were not well-known for their performance skills should not be involved in the assessment and feedback processes was wide-spread among participants (students and tutors) who had a strong self-image as performers:

You don’t get people who write academic books to be read by people who are not academics; and to say ‘Oh okay, this is, I don’t really get this book, could you please just write it all with simple words, small words- erm I think it would be [...] the same as having a musicologist assess a performance exam.

This view, however, was not unanimous; some performance students considered receiving feedback from academic tutors unproblematic because of their belief that the practice of including academic tutors on performance examination panels automatically validated academic tutors’ assessment and feedback skills; other participants expressed the view that academic tutors had the necessary knowledge and experience to make a valuable contribution in this context:

[Academic tutors] have got some inside knowledge, and I’ve never met a musicologist who didn’t play an instrument at some sort of level, for heaven’s sake. Erm, so, yeah, I don’t see a problem with [academic tutors assessing performance recitals]. I know it’s a bit unpopular. I’ve heard the occasional beef about that from students, ‘What’s so and so doing examining, he’s not a performer?’ But I think it’s legitimate because, anybody who hasn’t got completely tin ear is entitled to, hold what may very well be a well-informed opinion on the actual emotional effectiveness, if you like, of somebody’s performance.

Most students and instrumental tutors agreed that formative feedback received in teaching/learning contexts from academic tutors who also had a role as internal examiners was particularly valuable because it allowed students (and their tutors) to understand what would be expected from them during the exam. As such, this feedback would be taken into consideration in the

context of one-to-one lessons, even when it did not support the interpretative choices originally made by a student and endorsed by their instrumental tutor; as student explained:

There also comes a time when if you know who's going to be sitting in your exam and they prefer you to play it like that, sometimes you just have to bite the bullet and play it like that because it's going to please them.

2.1.3. External vs. local feedback

Participants attached different values to feedback according to whether it was given by a 'local' tutor, a tutor on the departmental staff, or by an 'external' tutor, who was not attached to the Department and whose involvement with the modules was limited to a one-off performance class or examination. Beliefs related to identity knowledge – the degree to which a tutor was familiar with the students' performance abilities and their progress, and students' familiarity with the tutors' professional background and teaching style – emerged as significant mediating factors in students' and tutors' attitude towards 'local' and 'external' feedback.

In the eyes of most students, a tutor or an examiner that came from outside the Music Department had a professional aura that members of staff generally did not; for this reason 'external' feedback was automatically viewed as authoritative.

Academic members of staff placed value on 'external' tutors' and examiners' feedback because it was perceived as neutral – and therefore 'completely objective'. This quality was seen to stem from the external tutors' and examiners' ability to evaluate what a student produced on its own merits. However, as an academic tutor pointed out, introducing an 'external' person into the context of examinations could at times result in students receiving feedback which was 'less integrated' and 'more contradictory' especially in cases when instrumental tutors were not present at their students' exams and, therefore, did not have the opportunity to discuss with the members of the examination panel what feedback would be given to their students.

Instrumental tutors commented on the fact that external feedback to students was valuable mostly when it came from specialist tutors or examiners because their feedback and feedforward would generally focus on the 'finer points' of students' performance; in these cases, tutors would be willing to take them into consideration and try out 'external' suggestions with their students; interestingly, feedback on 'general musicianship' was dismissed, by and large, as not useful in the context of one-to-one lessons.

2.1.4. Students' self-perception and engagement with feedback

Participants generally conceived of performance students as belonging to one of two different groups: on the one hand, those who saw themselves as performers; on the other, those who took performance modules either because it was a compulsory module (at Level 1) or because this module was thought to be an 'easier' option than many others in the degree (due to the fact that students did not have to 'write essays'). Participants commented on the fact that students' motivation and their 'agendas' would have a considerable effect on students' reaction to the feedback received.

Commitment to 'being' or 'becoming' a performer emerged as a fundamental reason why some students were able to achieve a greater depth of engagement with the feedback they received or were resourceful enough to look for alternative feedback when the 'official' one was not considered sufficient. For example, this is how a L1 student, committed to continuing with performance at L2, reacted to what she experienced as a difficult feedback situation: rather than dismissing some 'contradictory' formative feedback on technique as useless, this student used the feedback received as an opportunity to explore what it meant to be doing performance in the context of the performance modules and to reflect on what kind of performer she wanted to be:

It did really make me question, 'what is the point of the performance course?' Are we going to try and [...] show off the best technique and general performance or [...] do we have to play up to what the examiners want to hear?

Participants' comments also highlighted the fact that sometimes a student's self-perception needed to change before they would be able to engage fully with the feedback; a student who felt 'I'm good at this' might simply refuse to consider the constructive criticism received; a student illustrated this situation:

Once I got over that sort of 'oh, I was brilliant, I was really good, I was loads better than that', you know, once you sort of come down a peg or two you think well actually, that [feedback] is really useful.

Interestingly, it emerged that students' self-perception, as well as their understanding of feedback, was also shaped by feedback sharing, an activity in which students discussed and compared 'private' feedback (that is, feedback received in the context of one-to-one lessons and exams) with their peers and instrumental tutors. This social activity would allow students to gain a better understanding of the feedback received, while enabling them to get a sense of where they fit in the 'performance community'.

2.2. Perceived objectivity/subjectivity of feedback content

Most tutors and students spoke of ‘objectivity’ as a valuable, if not necessary, quality in feedback; at the same time participants expressed the belief that musical performance was in many respects ‘a matter of personal taste’ and that, therefore, feedback on most aspects of performance would be subjective. As participants shared their views about the feasibility of giving objective feedback in an artistic discipline such as musical performance, the following points emerged:

1. Objective feedback is possible only in relation to the printed score;
2. Specificity in feedback is a sign of objectivity;
3. Feedback on ‘matters of personal taste’ can only be subjective;
4. Feedback should refer to assessment criteria.

2.2.1. *Objective feedback and the printed score*

Participants stated that objective feedback in performance was possible only in cases in which one could talk about ‘rights and wrongs’ in relation to the printed score; for example, it would be possible to give objective comments on note pitches and rhythmic values, or the reproduction of score markings such as articulation, dynamics, speed, etc. An academic tutor expanded this concept further by stating that,

[feedback on] anything that is, you know, that is not...that doesn't obey either the letter or the spirit of the score, I would say was objective.

Participants discussed how reference to the score in different teaching and assessment settings could impact on the feedback process.

In the context of group classes, students performing on the day would be encouraged to make copies of their score(s) available to both tutor and, at more advanced levels, to peers, for feedback purposes:

You provide photocopies to your, to your peers so they can actually pinpoint various bars and say ‘No you didn’t do that *pp* there’ and things.

A student shared her ambivalent feelings about the usefulness of the score in these situations; she explained that following the score during a performance did encourage attention to specific, objective details, but at the same time it could prevent one from listening to a piece ‘as a whole’; she explained that she would normally avoid looking at the score, but:

If [during someone's performance] something really funny happened that I didn't think- or maybe if something was unrhythmical or something, I would check the score then, 'cause I, obviously I'd want to flag it up for them.

Reference to the score in group classes was perceived by some students also as a way of lending a certain degree of authority to peer feedback; as a student clarified:

If you don't have the score you don't want to say 'You must do this'.

In the context of one-to-one lessons, some instrumental tutors stressed the fact that even when referring to the score the division between objective and subjective feedback was not always clear-cut; for example, feedback on performance aspects such as the speed of a piece, which could come across as objective, needed to be 'unpacked' to be fully understood:

Too fast for what? Too fast because Beethoven put a slower metronome mark, which would be interesting to know as a, sort of, technical detail? Too fast because you couldn't play it that fast?

An instrumental tutor expressed the belief that reflective consideration of the score could help teachers give students feedback which was, at least to some degree, objective even on matters of interpretation; this could be achieved by,

constantly looking at the score and the details in the score, and asking yourself the question 'Okay maybe that's not how I would play it, but is this a valid interpretation?' Does it come from what's on the page?

In assessment contexts, students were required to provide the examiners with a copy of their scores. Some students felt that following the score during a performance might encourage examiners to 'look for faults' in someone's performance. However, when discussing evidence of the use of the score in relation to the examiners' feedback, a student commented:

I never really find them saying 'At this particular point you should have done this' or something. You never feel like, you know they had the score.

2.2.2. Specificity in feedback and feedforward as a sign of objectivity

Some students interpreted the ability to be specific when providing feedback as a sign of objectivity. A student gave an example from some written summative feedback she had recently received to illustrate this point: a comment such as 'this piece needs more dynamic contrast' was described as 'vague' and perceived as subjective feedback; however, the student explained that if the

feedback were clarified by adding a more specific detail, such as ‘overall, the piece was too loud’, it would turn that feedback into a more objective comment because of its implicit feedforward (‘pay more attention to soft dynamic levels’).

It is therefore not surprising that feeding forward explicitly on issues which had been identified as problematic was also interpreted by students as a way of providing objective comments. A student discussing the issue of objectivity in feedback offered an example from comments received in a SFF:

[This] feedback was kind of a lot more- I felt that it was actually more objective because [the examiner’s] actually just saying, you know, ‘the high range wasn’t always secure and the left hand was a bit behind’ and then how to improve that.

The same student illustrated how in a face-to-face situation, such as a group class, some ‘probing’ from the performer could tease out a more objective comment – in the form of specific feedforward – from the person offering feedback (in this case a peer):

I remember [a student] said to me, ‘oh you need to make it more beautiful at the start’, and then I was like, ‘what do you mean, “make it more beautiful”, what do I need to do with my bow?!

2.2.3. Feedback on ‘matters of personal taste’ is subjective

Performance aspects such as presentation, communication, and – to some extent – interpretation were described as ‘matters of personal taste’; feedback on these aspects was perceived as ‘a matter of opinion’ and, therefore, subjective. One of the implications drawn by some students was that ‘clashings of opinion’ regarding a specific performance were likely to happen and, therefore, performance students should expect to receive contradictory feedback when performing in front of more than one person, particularly in exam situations:

I guess feedback is just difficult for different [performers] because you have someone that would love [how you performed something], and someone that could hate it, or both of the examiners could hate it and you think ‘oh, I really like that’

Participants’ comments revealed the fact that not all opinions were perceived as equal. In some cases, the difference in ‘value’ was seen as related to the musical identity of the person offering their opinion; for example, a student related how her ‘non-specialist’ comment on a peer’s performance, in the context of a group class, was invalidated by a specialist’s feedback: ‘I was giving some feedback on something that I thought was really good, [but] it was, you know, not really technically good from a cellist’s point of view, an accomplished cellist’s view’. This situation was perceived as a ‘challenge’

by the student and an invitation to reflect on ‘what's actually good about music and what people like about music.’

In other cases, some opinions were perceived to have more weight than others because they ‘felt right’. A student sharing her own experience in this respect, explained,

you can choose whether the views of that person are useful and valuable to you as a performer in that specific case or piece... if I say ‘Okay that person really speaks to me and I want to listen more to what they have to say’ I don’t think I can explain why.

Many students and tutors felt strongly about the fact that when offering one’s personal opinions attention should be paid to the manner in which it was delivered; a participant clarified this point:

In giving what we hope is useful feedback, we all occasionally fall into the trap of presenting taste as some kind of historical imperative [...] I always try to remember to mention now and then that many of my suggestions are little or nothing more than opinion and therefore open to discussion or contradiction.

Participants thought of tutors and students who had ‘fallen into the trap’ described above as ‘opinionated’. Students reported that they would find feedback from such students and tutors a ‘put off’ and, consequently, they would learn to be ‘more wary’ in their engagement with feedback originating from ‘opinionated’ people.

2.2.4. Feedback should refer to common assessment criteria

Most participants agreed that for feedback to be perceived as somewhat objective by the receiver, both giver and receiver should be able to refer to the same assessment criteria and, most importantly, to interpret it the same way (cf. Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

In this respect, feedback in summative assessments was seen as the most problematic. Many participants expressed the view that the interpretation of the assessment criteria depended very much on the context in which performers were normally active. In the ‘local’ context – a University Music Department – there was an awareness of the academic demands on performance students, of the relatively small number of instrumental lessons students received during the academic year and of the implications of such factors on students’ preparation standards and repertoire choices; participants believed that this awareness informed the feedback given to students by ‘local’ tutors and examiners, making it more coherent. According to many participants’ experience, this feedback coherency was more difficult – if not impossible – to achieve by external examiners (who did not belong to the

Department's 'performance community'⁸) as they might not be able to use the 'local' assessment criteria without letting their own professional experience colour their understanding of such criteria. This is why the fact that a module leader had confirmed that both 'internal' and 'external' examiners used the same set of criteria to assess performance exams in the Department had not reassured some tutors. An instrumental tutor explained:

If you bring in an examiner from the outside who's been in the habit of hearing people at the music colleges, of course he's got that in his head, he's got a certain standard in his head, and he's gonna bring it in here as well, and he sees that [pointing to the copy of the assessment criteria], that doesn't mean anything, he's still got, the standard in his head, of what that 69, 60 to 69 [means] and [our students] are being assessed the same: they are being assessed the same here as they are outside and it's unfair, very unfair.

Discussion about the relationship between feedback and assessment criteria revealed differences in the participants' views about the role of assessment criteria in musical performance. This was particularly marked among academic tutors. On the one hand, assessment criteria were experienced as unnecessary for the evaluation of an artistic activity such as musical performance. A participant referred to the professional practice of the evaluation of performances in 'international competitions' to explain this view:

Performance is such a ... vague matter in a way, yeah? erm maybe a little bit, more vague than, sport, where you really need marks yeah? I guess, so I was never in favour of these assessment criteria because I think it's just... erm how to say it, it's kind of absurd prose, in the style of Eugène Ionesco or Kafka.⁹

On the other hand, marking criteria were seen as necessary in an educational context in which an examination panel was not just looking for 'a winner' among all students, but had to provide feedback on their performances and justify awarding a specific mark. A tutor expressed the view that, in some cases, following the criteria 'to the letter' could be helpful in achieving a certain objectivity:

We go back and check the wording, and make sure that the performance that we heard is being described, even in Kafkaesque language by what's in that little box, and particularly, if there's a borderline, I think they're particularly useful if we're thinking is this really a 2.1 or a 2.2 and then you go to the wording and well actually, by the letter of the law, it's a 2.2 [...] in that sense they're useful.

⁸ Participants explained that, generally, 'external' examiners came from the Conservatoire sector.

⁹ Cf. the article by Stanley et al. (2002), which discusses examiners' perceptions of the use of criteria in performance assessments.

Other tutors felt that, although criteria were helpful in the evaluation of musical performance, they were generally ‘a bit rigid’ and, therefore, had to be ‘interpreted in a flexible way’ as ‘it’s virtually impossible to draw hard and fast rules about how [a performance] should be.’

Comments on the role played by assessment criteria on the feedback process revealed very different levels of engagement with the existing departmental criteria among participants, not only in assessment contexts, but also in teaching and learning ones. It emerged that most instrumental tutors were either not familiar with the ‘local’ assessment criteria for performance or did not feel it was important to use them in teaching situations: as far as one-to-one lessons were concerned, tutors mostly referred to ‘personal’ criteria derived from their own experience as professional performers and teachers. Reference to personal criteria would imply a prioritisation of some aspects of performance over others, even though such distinctions were not made in the ‘local’ criteria: for example, valuing ‘beauty of sound’ or ‘musicality’ over ‘technical perfection’ and performances ‘from memory’ over those ‘from the score’. A few students stated they were familiar with the assessment criteria because they had been introduced to them in the course of performance classes; however, they admitted to not referring to them when preparing their exam programmes:

I just strive to pass the exam.

Some tutors expressed their concerns about the fact that students did not normally refer to (or even know) the assessment criteria used in the Department. An instrumental tutor saw this as a factor that impeded significantly students’ understanding of the feedback received: for this reason, the tutor would analyse the feedback together with her students and make them aware of ‘what is being alluded to and why’.

2.3. Public vs. private feedback contexts

Participants discussed the impact that different learning contexts could have on students when receiving and giving feedback, particularly in relation to what they referred to as ‘negative’ feedback (criticism). By design, formative feedback can take place in learning contexts which are more or less public: instrumental lessons are one-to-one, but students might have the opportunity to observe their fellow students’ lessons; in group classes students always receive oral feedback in front of peers and tutors.

Generally, the public nature of formative feedback was not perceived as an issue; as an academic tutor commented:

We’re talking about a performance art, something that happens in public: what is there to hide?

However, when talking about personal experiences of ‘negative’ feedback, students expressed the view that ‘major’ criticism should always be communicated ‘on a piece of paper or on a one-to-one basis’; in other words, ‘it should never ever be in front of someone else’.

Participants comments revealed that students could feel vulnerable in this context and – as a student explained when sharing her distressing experience – receiving ‘negative’ feedback in public could make one feel ‘really humiliated’ and ‘negative about the whole [performance] experience’.

Instrumental tutors showed an awareness of the fact that receiving ‘negative’ feedback in a public context could be a potentially ‘damaging’ experience for students and remarked that if, for any reason, criticism had to be delivered in public it had to be done ‘in a mild way or somehow delicate manner’.

Students also stated that the public nature of feedback would affect them considerably when they had to give (rather than receive) feedback: making public comments on their peers’ performances made most students feel uncomfortable. Students would try to be careful not to ‘offend’ anyone and also to avoid any confrontation with their peers; for this reason, they would often hold back their ‘honest opinions’ and focus their feedback on ‘positive’ aspects of their peers’ performances. In the case of written feedback submitted on the Virtual Learning Environment (‘Concert Reviews’ and ‘Peer Feedback’), students stated that anonymised submissions¹⁰ made a difference:

I think being anonymous helps you be able to say what you actually want to say rather than ‘Ooh god she won’t like me if I write that’.

3. What changes have students and tutors suggested to the current feedback system?

When participants were asked ‘Is there anything you would change about the feedback system for musical performance in this Department?’ only very few (among the academic tutors who participated to this study) said they would not change anything: ‘I wouldn’t look at anything and say, “this doesn’t work, we must change it”’; all remaining participants, however, felt that there were some significant issues that needed to be addressed and offered at least one suggestion (if not more) as to how the current system could improve. Their suggestions fall into three broad categories:

1. Feedback and Musical Identity
2. Feedback Strategies
3. Understanding of Feedback

¹⁰ At Level 1, written feedback on musical performance is now submitted anonymously. This change to the peer feedback system was introduced at the end of the first stage of this project, following the analysis of data collected during the focus groups.

3.1. Feedback and musical identity

As we saw in the Section 1.1, who gives feedback is experienced by both tutors and students as a significant mediating factor in the feedback process. It is not surprising, therefore, that many of the suggestions made by the participants were related to musical identity attributes of those providing formative and summative feedback in the context of the performance modules. The attributes taken into consideration were ‘specialism’ and ‘membership of a performance community’.

3.1.1. All performance students should receive specialist feedback in examinations

As reported in section 2.1.1 (p.17), participants experienced specialist feedback as vital for students’ development as performers. Most tutors and students expressed the belief that, as a rule, all examination panels should include a specialist – that is, ‘someone that knows what you’re doing inside out’ – which currently was not the case (cf . Assessment, p.7).

In students’ experience, summative feedback given by a non-specialist was more ‘abstract’ and, therefore, less ‘helpful’, particularly as far as feedback and feedforward on technical issues were concerned. Instrumental tutors were clearly concerned about the current situation:

I know it’s not possible monetary-wise, I know it’s a big problem really, but for me that’s, quite an important issue.

Participants generally believed that having specialist examiners for all instruments would give ‘more credibility’ and depth to the summative assessment and feedback processes, as well as ‘raise the standard’ and ‘profile’ of the performance modules.

3.1.2. Instrumental tutors should contribute to summative feedback

Although a very small number of instrumental tutors were involved in performance assessments such as technical tests and, more rarely, solo and ensemble recitals, most instrumental tutors had no assessment roles in the context of the performance modules.

The majority of members of staff who participated in this study believed that instrumental tutors should be involved in the summative assessment process on a regular basis and contribute to the feedback given to their own students in exam contexts. One of the reasons given for this belief was that instrumental tutors could provide ‘the bigger picture’ because of their knowledge of ‘what the student is like and how they work’:

If you can have the teacher say ‘Well, I do keep telling them that’, you know, erm, so then it’s good to stress something in a report that the teacher’s been saying.

An academic tutor also added,

if we had, all the instrumental teachers erm, at the panel, or at least in the hall, yeah? then I think the feedback would be, erm, kind of more integrated and less maybe contradictory because sometimes, the instrumental tutor has, his or her own opinion you know? and the examiners, they have their own opinion and the external may be, even the third opinion yeah? erm so students, maybe, may feel it, a little bit at loss you know and, you know where to go, what which opinion to follow.

Participants' opinion about this suggestion was not, however, unanimous. Many instrumental tutors said they would welcome the opportunity to 'voice their opinion' in the context of formal assessments and 'have a say' about the content of their students' SFFs. On the other hand, a few tutors thought that instrumental tutors' participation to the summative assessment process could be problematic: firstly, because it could affect negatively the relationship that tutor and student had constructed in the course of one-to-one lessons¹¹; secondly, because of 'the logistical nightmare of trying to get every member of visiting staff present for their particular student'. Thirdly, because some students might feel that the presence of their instrumental tutor made the assessment process less 'fair'. An instrumental tutor argued that in cases in which the external examiner on the panel was a 'specialist',

it would be better and fairer to the student, to have only an unbiased external examiner's opinion without the teacher's input [...] The whole process has to be considered impartial and fair to all and this is difficult to achieve when the teacher is included in the assessment.

3.1.3. There should be more opportunities for 'external' formative feedback

Some students felt that the fact they received formative specialist feedback exclusively from their own instrumental tutor, rather than from a range of specialists, could be restrictive; in cases in which the relationship between student and tutor was perceived as difficult, it could also contribute to an overall negative learning experience in the performance module.

Students expressed the view that access to another 'expert' point of view from someone outside the Music Department, once or twice per term, would allow them to gain different perspectives of their abilities as performers and of the progress made throughout the year; they would also be able to

¹¹ However, this would very much depend on the kind of relationship existent: some instrumental tutors and students felt that in cases of a positive relationship, the tutor's presence at the exam would 'consolidate' the one-to-one relationship built during lessons.

build up a clearer picture of performance standards (and implicit performance values) ‘out there in the real world’. A student suggested specifically,

it would be good if you had sort of erm kind of like a work experience thing but going and play, well, I don't know whether- don't know whether it would be possible to go play for a day with the LSO players, but something like that, to get a taste of the professional world and to get feedback from the other players.

3.2. Feedback strategies

Although tutors and students made it clear that many of the feedback strategies currently used in the performance modules had the potential to provide excellent support to students’ learning experience, they believed that in practice these strategies needed to be fine-tuned and their use more wide-spread and consistent, particularly in relation to motivating students, developing their feedback skills and providing them with a wide range of performance-related reference points.

3.2.1. *Feedback should be more motivating*

Students expressed the view that instrumental and academic tutors should make more room for feedback which is motivational and supportive; too much of the feedback they were receiving focused on ‘what went wrong’, ‘what could be improved’: they felt that tutors were implicitly (or explicitly) sending them the message ‘oh God I’m so, so disappointed!’

Students suggested that a simple ‘push on now, you can do it!’ from their tutors could be enough to balance out ‘negative’ feedback and build up or support students’ self-belief as performers; this, in turn, would make them approach their individual practice sessions – and the performance module as a whole – with greater motivation, even when going through a difficult period.

Some tutors observed that an entirely ‘gentle’ approach to feeding back could be just as counterproductive as one that focused mostly on criticism; a tutor recalled an instance in which ‘telling off’ some students (because of their persistent lack of preparation) ‘shocked them’ into practising and preparing an excellent performance; he reflected,

maybe [their reaction to the feedback] tells us something about [...] the way we treat the students along the way, what we let them get away with, you know what I mean? Maybe we should be harder on them and more strict in terms of the feedback we give them before they actually come to the final exam bit.

3.2.2. Tutors should be more 'present'

Students suggested that it would be extremely valuable to receive formative feedback from tutors in the context of performing situations with a 'real audience', such as non-assessed, Departmental lunchtime and evening recitals. Some students confessed they felt 'quite bitter' about the fact that 'when you prepare something [...] none of the teachers come to listen to that':

I understand that their lives are really busy and they've got other stuff, they're writing a book or they're doing this, so that's why they can't come to it but, I maybe rather have someone, maybe not as good [laughing], what their CV says but, if they've got the time to put into the course.

Students felt there was need for 'someone to be there [at the recitals] and have that, connection with the [students]', a person who could provide 'a critical evaluation of what you've done' and give students a clearer perspective of how they were 'coming along'.

3.2.3. Students should be taught how to feedback

Some tutors felt that peer feedback skills should be 'cultivated' more actively: even though peer feedback activities were designed into the performance modules, not all students were skilled at giving feedback when they started their degree and they needed to be guided through the process of learning how to do it well.

Tutors suggested students should be helped to 'refine their rather gross feedback' – such as 'I didn't like that' and 'I was bored' – and encouraged to be 'critical in detail' by actively participating to in-depth discussions on performances. A participant gave a specific suggestion about the context of group classes: to prevent students from being 'passive', and seminars from turning 'into something of a masterclass,' tutors could,

try and lead a discussion in a particular direction, centred on some particular aspect of the performance so that [students] actually feel they're contributing [...] to a discussion.

As far as students were concerned, making all written peer feedback anonymous would help them employ their critical skills more fully and allow them to 'say what they thought' about their peers' performances with more honesty; interestingly, one student suggested that even in seminars peer feedback should be anonymous: 'written down' during the performances and then passed on to each student who had performed in the context of the class.

In terms of students' self-critical skills, a tutor felt that their development should be addressed formally by introducing activities such as 'self-reflective statements' as part of the performance modules; in this context students could be asked to reflect, for example, on

how they think they've coped with the past term or two terms or whenever they write it; things that they felt have been positive; ways in which they've moved on; also things that they're looking to really think about more and improve; how they use their time.

Video-recording was suggested as another tool which could be incorporated and used towards the same goal: the mere act of video-recording and 'watching oneself' would provide valuable self-feedback to students. A tutor commented,

I've always been very surprised that in music we use film so little. In other fields of, erm, sport and everything, they use film an enormous amount and have done for a long time. And it seems to be it's a very, er, because it's such ready technology, it allows us to retrieve performance and, and such situations, er, for feedback, for comment, and in a way, because performance, you just do it and it goes and it's lost, it's just there as a moment in time. [...] it's very interesting to see one's personal reaction to [filming oneself] and learn from that.

3.2.4. Students should be given clear performance-related reference points

Some academic tutors felt very strongly about the need to encourage students to listen to a wide range of recordings by professional performers so they could become more sensitive to the different ways in which classical repertoire can be approached from stylistic and interpretative points of view. A tutor reported with concern that students 'don't listen to any music' and 'don't know the basic repertoire:

I talk to [performance students] in the department and you find they don't actually know any top soloists. You know, they're learning a piece, and you say, do you know so-and-so's recording of that, they don't even know the [performer]. Do you know what I mean? Erm, and I find that really... perplexing.

This lack of knowledge in relation to stylistic and interpretative approaches could have serious implications on students' approach to the feedback received; as another tutor pointed out,

it's all very well when a student comes along [to the exam] and plays everything, you know, just sort of note by note or bar by bar to say, 'Oh, you,' you know, in feedback, you know, 'you could develop your flexibility and phrasing.' Well, they'll just look at that and say, 'Oh,' but they don't know what you mean. They

don't really know what you mean. They don't, you know...they understand the words, but they don't, they don't feel it. They don't, you know, it's not part of their, whole approach.

It was suggested that instrumental tutors should recommend 'different kinds of recordings' for students to listen to so as to 'awaken the musicality within' and to provide them with some clear 'reference points' which students could then use to make informed interpretative choices.

3.3. Understanding of feedback

Providing feedback that students can comprehend and put into practice is only in part a matter of clarity of content – a category which ranges from giving specific and detailed feedback and feedforward, to appropriate use of language, to typing up written feedback to ensure it is legible. When discussing how feedback practices could improve so as to facilitate and encourage students' understanding of feedback and their ability to 'take it onboard', participants made the following suggestions:

1. Feedback should be delivered face-to-face
2. Students should be taught how to cope with 'negative' feedback
3. A shared understanding of assessment criteria should be reached

3.3.1. Summative feedback should be delivered 'face-to-face'

In assessment contexts: students generally reported that feedback received from examiners was perceived as 'vague', 'impersonal' and lacking sufficient information on 'how to improve', all factors that made it difficult for them to fully understand the feedback or to put into practice; a student looking back at three years of performance modules reflected,

I worked so very hard for my recitals and was given an A4 sheet of paper in return with some comments. To me, it was much like an anti-climax every time and the feedback just felt very distant.

Although only one student spelt out the fact that feedback should be 'a two way process' (cf. Juwah *et al.*, 2004: 7), all students expressed the opinion that receiving feedback in the form of a written report was not sufficient and that performance exams should include 'interaction with the person that marked [the performance]'. Students suggested that after the recital 'an actual discussion' could take place between student and examiners about 'what could improve', 'what went wrong' and 'things that went right.' 'Face-to-face' interaction would also allow students to ask examiners to clarify any parts of the feedback found unclear or too vague (cf. Pitts, 2005: 223). Students felt that this type of summative feedback would be far more relevant to them than the written one because it

would inevitably be ‘personalised’, that is, tailored to the needs of each specific student and, therefore, easier to ‘take onboard’.

Some academic tutors stated they were keen to introduce a ‘viva’ after performance exams in order to make the feedback process more effective:

We would actually speak to the students and give them verbal feedback which is then recorded, rather than a written report, so then you can talk to the student, ask them questions, which is better [than a written report].

In teaching/learning contexts: students reported they would welcome more ‘face-to-face’ feedback also from their tutors (both instrumental and academic). They suggested they should be given ‘the opportunity to sit down and talk’ with both instrumental tutors and module leaders outside the context of the lessons, in order to gain a better understanding of ‘how they were doing’; a student talking about the instrumental context explained,

a face-to-face meeting would have allowed me to fully understand exactly where I had reached in terms of progress.

3.3.2. Students should be taught how to cope with ‘negative’ feedback

Participants who believed that students’ understanding and reaction to feedback depended in part on the attitude with which it was received stressed the fact that students should be taught how to deal with ‘negative’ feedback. Some tutors pointed out that,

we have to teach [students] to take the right attitude towards negative results: it has to make them more ambitious, rather than depressing them.

Some participants (students and tutors) expressed the view that students had to learn how ‘to take out what’s positive and leave the negative’ so they would not ‘panic’ when criticised in any feedback context.

Instrumental tutors’ suggestions regarding how students could be helped to deal with feedback varied: some believed that reminding students that the feedback they received was ‘just one person’s view’ could help them cope with criticism better; others stressed the fact that students needed to be taught how to ‘remove all the judgment’ out of the feedback they received – that is, the implicit or sometimes explicit statement ‘you are wrong’ – because it could ‘block’ them. It was also suggested that ‘encouraging [students] to listen to themselves when they practice’ would help them ‘come away [on the day of the exam] with a fairly clear impression of how they perceive their performance’; this,

in turn, would allow them to get a more ‘balanced’ perspective of the criticism received and, therefore, cope better with it.

3.3.3. A shared understanding of assessment criteria should be reached

The majority of the participants acknowledged the need for both tutors and students to gain a shared understanding of the criteria and language used for the evaluation of musical performance. As some tutors pointed out, without an understanding of the criteria, students’ ability to translate the feedback received ‘into any changes that they might take on in their performance is minimal’. In fact, this lack of shared understanding could also have a negative impact on how instrumental tutors perceived their own contribution to students’ preparation towards exams; as a tutor put it, one could end up feeling ‘a little bit out of the loop as to what the [examination] panel are looking for’.

In conclusion, tutors remarked that assessment criteria (and their interpretation) should reflect what we want to hear and consider valuable in a performance; and, consequently, what we believe performance students should aim for. Reaching a shared understanding of the criteria used – as well as of the values and beliefs that underpin them – would not only facilitate students’ interaction with the feedback received, but also help students and tutors take responsibility together for the feedback process.

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Appendix 1

Table 1: Focus groups with Performance students

Academic Year 2009- 2010	L1 (first year undergraduate)	L2 (second year undergraduate)	L3 (third year undergraduate)
Students taking Performance modules	35	23	16
Breakdown by instrument	Cello: 1 Flute: 3 Piano: 12 Saxophone: 2 Trumpet: 1 Tuba: 1 Viola: 1 Violin: 2 Voice: 12	Bassoon: 1 Clarinet: 4 Flute: 3 French horn: 1 Guitar: 2 Oboe: 1 Percussion: 1 Piano: 4 Sax: 1 Viola: 1 Violin: 2 Voice: 2	Clarinet: 2 Double bass: 1 Flute: 1 Guitar: 2 Pianos: 2 Trombone: 2 Trumpet: 1 Tuba: 1 Violin: 2 Voice: 2
Number of Focus Group Participants	9	6	6
Instruments represented	Flute: 1 Piano: 3 Saxophone: 1 Voice: 4	Flute: 1 Piano: 2 Violin: 2 Voice: 2	Piano: 1 Trombone: 2 Violin: 1 Voice: 2

Table 2: Interviews with Performance students

Academic Year 2010- 2011	L1 (first year undergraduate)	L2 (second year undergraduate)	L3 (third year undergraduate)
Students taking Performance modules	31	28	15
Breakdown by instrument	Cello: 2 Clarinet: 1 Flute: 1 Guitar: 2 Piano: 11 Trombone: 2 Trumpet: 3 Violin: 1 Voice: 8	Cello: 1 Flute: 2 Piano: 11 Saxophone: 2 Trumpet: 1 Tuba: 1 Viola: 1 Violin: 1 Voice: 8	Bassoon: 1 Clarinet: 2 Flute: 1 French horn: 1 Guitar: 2 Oboe: 1 Piano: 3 Sax: 1 Violin: 1 Voice: 2
Number of one-to-one interview Participants	3	3	4
Instruments represented	Cello: 1 Voice: 2	Trumpet: 1 Piano: 1 Viola: 1	Clarinet: 1 French Horn: 1 Guitar: 1 Saxophone: 1

Appendix 2

Criteria for Classical Performance (2009-2010)

In defining a convincing performance the examiners will pay particular attention to the following key elements:

A performance which is technically assured

A performance which is informed by an appropriate sense of style

A performance which demonstrates an understanding of the work as a whole

A performer who displays some measure of individuality in their approach to the music

Not all of these will be given equal weight at all times; scales and arpeggios will clearly demand more of element 1, whereas studies may demand not only technical assurance but also more of elements 2-4. Core repertoire will make variable demands on all of these elements.

Grade %	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
First (80+)	An excellent performance in all respects, particularly with regard to musical interpretation. Technical exercises are largely flawless	An exceptional performance in all respects.	An exceptional performance, worthy of professional presentation in all respects.
First (70-79)	The conviction and technical mastery is secure, and a convincing musical interpretation consistently holds the attention of the audience. Specific technical virtues, such as dexterity, flexible dynamics, secure intonation, timbral diversity and control, rhythmic accuracy and intelligent phrasing, are evident and deployed to good effect. The performer appears relaxed and confident. Technical exercises are near faultless, as is sight-reading.	The conviction and technical mastery of the performer, though respectful towards the general style of the piece, holds the attention of the listener to both its local and large-scale properties. Specific technical virtues, such as dexterity, flexible dynamics, secure intonation, timbral diversity and control, rhythmic accuracy and intelligent phrasing, are all so well executed as to be subsumed into the experience of the music. The music is performed in a relaxed and confident manner. Technical exercise are near faultless, as is sight-reading.	An exceptional performance, largely worthy of professional presentation, albeit with minor flaws of detail. Conviction, technical mastery and stylistic understanding are all excellent. Specific technical virtues, such as dexterity, flexible dynamics, secure intonation, timbral diversity and control, rhythmic accuracy and intelligent phrasing, are essentially flawless. Presentation is relaxed, confident and secure.
2:1 (60-69)	The performer demonstrates some sympathy with the stylistic demands of the piece, although this may not necessarily be profound. A good level of technical security with respect to dexterity, flexible dynamics, secure intonation, timbral diversity and control, rhythmic accuracy and appropriate phrasing is evident throughout most of the performance. The music is performed in a relaxed and confident manner. Technical exercises are generally secure throughout, although with occasional noticeable errors. Sight reading displays an ability quickly to come to terms with the piece, and with few errors.	There is a good understanding of the relationship between piece and style. A good level of technical security with respect to dexterity, flexible dynamics, secure intonation, timbral diversity and control, rhythmic accuracy and appropriate phrasing is evident throughout most of the performance. The music is performed in a relaxed and confident manner. Technical exercises are polished albeit with small slips. Sight reading displays an ability quickly to come to terms with the piece, and with few errors.	There is a clear and demonstrable understanding of the relationship between piece and style. There is a high level of technical security with respect to dexterity, flexible dynamics, secure intonation, timbral diversity and control, rhythmic accuracy and appropriate phrasing. The music is performed in a relaxed and confident manner. Technical exercises are polished and executed at good speeds. Sight reading displays an ability quickly to come to terms with the piece, and with few errors.
2:2 (50-59)	Technical security with respect to the following is sometimes flawed:	Technical security with respect to the following is sometimes flawed: dexterity, flexible dynamics, secure intonation and timbre, rhythmic	Technical security with respect to the following is occasionally but obviously flawed: dexterity, flexible dynamics, secure intonation and timbre, rhythmic accuracy and

	<p>dexterity, flexible dynamics, secure intonation and timbre, rhythmic accuracy and appropriate phrasing. There is some evidence of stylistic sympathy, but it lacks consistency. The presentation is secure without being elegant. Technical exercises have been practised, but lack fluency. Sight reading shows errors, although the basic shape remains always recognisable.</p>	<p>accuracy and appropriate phrasing. The performer's sympathy with the musical style may be occasionally evident, but is often absent, and not presented with conviction. The presentation may lack confidence/elegance. Technical exercises have been practised, but are let down by lack of fluency and may be under speed. Sight reading shows some errors, although the basic shape remains always recognisable.</p>	<p>appropriate phrasing. The understanding of the relationship between piece and style is less than obvious, and not communicated adequately to the audience. The presentation may lack confidence/elegance. Technical exercises have been practised, but are let down by lack of fluency, noticeable errors, or lack of speed. Sight reading shows significant errors, although the basic shape remains recognisable.</p>
3rd (40-49)	<p>Although the voice or instrument may be poorly controlled, there are occasional secure and musically interesting passages. Musical cohesion is often lacking, but again occasionally present. Technical exercises have notable errors, but appear to have been practiced, if somewhat inadequately. Sight reading is generally poor, but recognisable.</p>	<p>The handling of the voice or instrument may show some degree of control though not consistently so, and perhaps at the expense of musical cohesion. Technical exercises are notably error-strewn, suggesting lack of competence and practice. Sight reading is poor, with numerous and significant errors.</p>	<p>The handling of the voice or instrument is often inconsistent. Musical cohesion is frequently lacking, and there is little by way of interpretive insight. There may be significant technical defects indicating lack of competence and practice. Sight reading is poor, with numerous and significant errors.</p>
Pass (35-39)	<p>There is frequently insufficient control of the voice or instrument. Although there may be some evidence of musical or stylistic understanding, technical deficiencies undermine this. Technical exercises may be unknown or seriously flawed in their execution. Sight reading is weak throughout, with major errors and no evidence of musical structure or shape.</p>	<p>There is so little control of the voice or instrument as to seriously disable musical interpretation. Technical exercises appear largely unknown, or are flawed in their execution. Sight reading is weak throughout, with major errors and no evidence of musical structure or shape.</p>	<p>Adequate control of voice or instrument is generally lacking. This consistently undermines any real sense of musical interpretation. Technical exercises are often flawed in their execution, demonstrating an inadequate grasp of instrumental or vocal technique. Sight reading is weak throughout, with major errors and no evidence of musical structure or shape.</p>
Fail (below 35)	<p>There is no sense of shape or structure to any significant part of the performance. Works chosen for performance may be unnecessarily lacking</p>	<p>Technical ineptitude largely undermines the performance, to the extent that musical interpretation is difficult or impossible to discern. Technical exercises are clearly beyond the candidate's ability. Sight reading bears little relationship to the</p>	<p>Technical ineptitude clearly undermines some parts of the performance; musical interpretation or stylistic sympathy thus become impossible to discern. Many technical aspects of chosen works appear beyond the candidate's ability. Sight reading bears little relationship to the printed score.</p>

	challenge or sophistication. Technical exercises are clearly beyond the candidate's ability. Sight reading bears little relationship to the printed score.	printed score.	
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Appendix 3

An example of Structured Feedback Form

Course: Performance and Critical Listening

Assignment: Final Recital

Marker(s):

Date:

Candidate number/name:

Mark:

%

Please note marks are provisional until confirmed by the relevant exam board.

Technical abilities (technical control, fluency, accuracy, tone production and projection; diction and pronunciation – singers only)

unsatisfactory satisfactory good very good excellent

Understanding of the piece as a whole (phrasing, dynamic/timbral diversity, sense of pulse, flexibility, musical cohesion; ensemble)

unsatisfactory satisfactory good very good excellent

Stylistic awareness (understanding of the relationship between piece and period in which it was written; coherency of interpretation)

unsatisfactory satisfactory good very good excellent

Approach to music (involvement with music; individuality of approach; communication with audience)

unsatisfactory satisfactory good very good excellent

Presentation (stage manner, confidence; programme notes/oral presentation – where applicable)

unsatisfactory satisfactory good very good excellent

General Comments:

What to do to improve the mark: