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Interruptions Reshaped into Transitions: Personal Reflections on the Identity Challenges of Moving to Music Education

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This article examines the process by which I came to accept music education as something that I do, enjoy, and respect. The primary data used for this inquiry were brief autobiographical narratives outlining two time periods of my life. The first described my musical experiences in public school and as a performance major both at the undergraduate and graduate levels, which happened before the 'interruption' that was my decision to pursue a degree in music education. The second described the following four and a half year period in which my relationship with music education transitioned across several shapes. I refer to the word 'identity' as how I see myself, although throughout the article 'identity' often reflects multiple identities, or ways in which I see myself, at times attempting to integrate with each other, at times as an undivided whole.

The framework of looking at 'interruptions reshaped into transitions' is borrowed from Bateson (1989, 236). Taking on new identities is not automatically straightforward and without challenges, especially when this change takes place in and is contextualized by an institutional setting. Furthermore, for music students the move to education from another major is particularly difficult given its status in music schools. Several factors played a role in allowing me to interpret the series of interruptions that distanced and then led me to music education as the transitions of a musical life. These factors include observations of and interactions with successful models; increased exposure to positive music education experiences; aspects common to music education and another 'accepted' academic or musical area such as performance; awareness of research in identity; my 'maturity' based on in and out of university experiences; ways of being musical outside of the music school and its distinct labels; and introspection.

Identities Interrupted: Setting a stage of departure

In order for there to be an interruption, there initially has to have been a continuity. At first glance, I was confident that this continuity was my label 'performance major', an identity that I had constructed over my time in the music school and that was interrupted by enrolling in a music education degree. Roberts (1993) demonstrates that music schools are places in which there exist socially-constructed hierarchies: performance is placed at the top while the music education degree is often considered a "back-up" or "dead-end" (191). Furthermore he writes, "...the quest for the status of 'musician' drives the music school. It is the ultimate and almost exclusive quest among the members of the music school" (59). This was not dissimilar from my perceptions of the music school experience.

The actual change of label, effectuated by the degree change, did in fact present its own challenges, which I discuss later. However I realized that the point of interruption occurred undetected and prior to 'changing labels'. Tightly enclosed within and protected by my strong and community-encouraged identity 'performance major' lived a much broader vision of myself as a musician.¹ This vision was based on the model of my first percussion teacher, who represented a Whole Musician and a lifestyle that made sense to me. He performed in the symphony orchestra, taught at the university and at home to younger students, composed creative performance projects, and ran an international festival. This 'whole' identity was not a sum of its parts: in my eyes there was no division between the various musical roles, and I had developed a deep curiosity about anything music-related.

This multi-faceted identity was never openly challenged by my teachers, my peers, or by the school during my undergraduate degree, which took place in two separate university settings.² In addition to practicing with fervour for all of my performance-related courses, I approached my academic studies with equal seriousness. Furthermore, all of my percussion teachers were immensely supportive of my compositional endeavors. As an undergraduate student I was asked by a fellow student about my dream, to which I responded: "To be an international soloist performing my own music." His remark: "But even X has to teach [at the university]". However, teaching, and in particular university studio teaching, had always been an important part of the dream in my mind and I felt no discomfort in explaining this detail.

Thus a crisis broke out when, at the time of my Masters in performance at a third university, my studio teacher challenged, even opposed, this broader identity that lived within my performance major shell.³ This became a turning point during which several things

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happened. I was forced to examine the nature and actual integration of my identities, which was blurry at best. I had to deliberately separate and reassess the individual parts within in order to once again feel like an integrated whole and had to acknowledge the importance of my many musical identities to the successful realization of my actual inner vision of musician. I became aware that within and outside of the music school most musicians have many roles, an idea that I realized did not resonate with the music school and was even discouraged by some professors who were in fact living that very reality.⁴

The threat that I felt to my broader identity was even more pronounced on the outer level of my being a 'performer who did other things' for this now seemed to be an unacceptable approach for any 'serious performer'. I realized that under the control of a music school performance studio, my personal vision of and approach to being a performer could not survive. I needed to find a way in which to exist within the music school that made sense to me and I reasoned that perhaps a PhD in music education could serve as an alternative path by which to do so. Therefore, entering music education also served as a way of protecting my (deviant) performer identity.

During the second time period, I had to face two main identity challenges, the first being the blurriness of my overall, broader identity; and the second being my definition of music education.

Addressing Identities

My broader identity, which lived within my performer's shell had not been overtly challenged in the music schools in the 'first period'. However, upon further examination, I realized that the institution of the music school was a major interruption of how I saw myself as a musician. This musician of 'many hats' was an undivided and whole picture model that I had developed two years prior to joining the music school when I had begun studying with my percussion teacher in his home studio.

It was in the influential setting of the music school that I became conscious of being a performance major. This one part of my model quickly became the shell in which the broader identity could live, creating the first degree of separation. My original model became distorted when the aspect of performer grew so large at times as to negate the other ways in which I saw, or potentially saw⁵, myself. And when my focus narrowed on performance, inner-conflict emerged. For example, in my third year I took performance-related courses almost

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exclusively, which made me unhappy and affected my overall well-being. Moreover, as the prominent identity by which I acted and felt judged, my self-esteem rested almost exclusively in my ability to be a 'successful performer'. It was difficult to ignore the expectations of others and myself of what a performer should be, including devoting oneself to tremendous hours of practice and 'making sacrifices'.⁶

A hierarchy developed within me that reflected the hierarchy of the music school and the performer was steadfast on top. Musical and non-musical academic coursework had been drastically reduced and teaching had gradually become a quiet and understated part of my dream, seldom reflected in my daily life. As Roberts writes about a singer in the music school setting who sought stardom, "whatever other role-identities she may be considering such as 'education' (albeit in lower priorities) might possibly remain oppressed and underdeveloped and that could very well be against her own self-interest" (1993, 5). It should also be noted that performance was exclusively associated in my mind with my instrument major: percussion. I was Percussion. In fact, it would be difficult to assess which label was more significant for me between Percussionist and Performer.

In sum, I had begun with one whole musical identity, which can be represented by a circle. This identity consisted of performer, musician, academic, composer, and teacher, and unlike a clearly divided pie chart, the pieces were integrated and blended together as a whole. Upon entering music school, that circle still existed however only within the outside shell of Percussion-Performance Major. A separation had occurred. After the crisis, I had to reassess the individual parts that comprised the whole identity. In particular I had to rethink and rediscover my concept of 'music education', which ironically had become a new shell under whose cover my 'identity sorting out' could happen and my 'deviant performer' could hide.

Challenges

When we change majors within a music school, we do not add or adopt a new label: we change it. The label determines how most 'others of the music school' define us, regardless of the actual reality and how we may divide our time. This was a fact of which I was very aware when I boldly entered the realm of music education yet still dared to be a performer. I admit that I was even somewhat relieved when this was proven true by others' immediate attitudes and reactions because I had wondered if perhaps all along my perceptions had only been based on paranoia.

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I felt the most reproach from the percussion community, and it is important to keep in mind that I had graduated with a Masters in percussion performance only four months prior to starting my PhD in Music Education at the same university, with many of the same people as peers. Some students expressed that I should not be allowed to perform a concerto project that I had organized myself and that it should be given to a performance major. Others directly commented to me that I should have reduced access to the percussion facilities. But what was most difficult for me was a reaction from a musician with whom I had worked for years and whose abilities I greatly respected. Upon hearing the news of my new degree enrollment, he concluded that I was no longer serious about percussion. I was dismissed, despite that in actual reality I was performing more often and more interesting concerts after I began the PhD in music education. The negative reactions from others were unpleasant and upsetting, yet manageable.⁷

During the first couple of years of my degree in music education, I made concerted efforts to maintain my performance front whenever possible to 'others in the music school.' This was done by highlighting my performance achievements and downplaying the 'music education' elements of my degree. However, I felt 'safe' talking openly about music education to other people within music education and 'fairly safe' talking to PhD students in other academic fields including musicology and theory. One way in which I successfully avoided calling attention to the 'music education-ness' of my degree when asked my major was answering 'PhD in music research' instead of 'music education' and emphasizing my doctoral status and topic, which was centered around university studio teaching. While that may seem ridiculous, it was a strategy given to me by another student who had been in exactly the same situation. She reported to me her own experiences of other students, mostly performers, withdrawing their interest in her upon discovering that she was in music education and she found that using any word other than 'education' greatly lessened this reaction. Furthermore, in the beginning I found myself agreeing with other doctoral students who felt that teaching music was a worthwhile endeavor if done at the university level but that it was simply beneath any 'serious musician' to do so in the public school system.

I was desperate to maintain my performer identity after my label change, but I realized that this was not the main cause of my internal conflict. After all, I had made a conscious and informed choice to enter music education, which also served as a way of protecting my performer identity. The identity challenge was ultimately due to my lack of conviction in

music education, in particular as defined by the music school community, and a failure to fully accept association with that definition and identity. When others would exhibit disapproval or disdain, they were merely reflecting traces of this in my own beliefs that I was undoubtedly projecting onto them.

My conflict was based on a personal confusion of definitions pertaining to music education and an unresolved integration of the various musical ways in which I saw myself. I was in no-man's land. I did not feel a sense of belonging or allegiance to any music field. And despite my initial disloyalty to music education, I was equally ashamed that I could not properly and proudly enter into my new identity. There were many aspects that appealed to me in music education and with which I identified but I was missing a clear and integral vision of my new relationship with it. In order to better understand how I came to find myself at this juncture, I further probed the first period of my narrative.

After revisiting my autobiographical narrative, several reasons became apparent as to why I deliberately separated music education from my own ideas of what teaching meant. Firstly, my experiences with my private percussion teachers were positive. They listened to me, they seemed to care about me, and gave me specific work to do, which I generally understood and was able to accomplish. Conversely, my experiences with my band teachers were for the most part negative. I rarely understood the goals, seldom felt that I was given the proper tools with which to grow, and sitting at the back of the percussion section I was mostly inactive while waiting to play and generally ignored by the band teacher unless it was to scold the section for our lack of concentration. Consequently, I attributed very little value to musical experiences within the public school system at the secondary level. Having established such beliefs *before* entering the music school, it was not surprising that I readily attributed a position of inferiority to music education. This idea reflected and validated my own experiences: it was music education's fault and not my own that I had had such a difficult time in the school band program.

Opening Up 'Teacher'

In dismantling my identity, I was able to look more closely at the concept of 'teacher'. Redefinition and broadening were necessary in order to find a peace within myself regarding the personal value of my new degree. 'Teaching' had always been important to me, yet my overriding lens of 'percussionist' gradually closed my personal definition of what teacher

could mean for me. 'Percussion performance' was an area in which I felt competent and content. Oddly enough my inner and often hidden desire to teach was what spurred me on in my quest to improve and learn as much as possible for my future career as a performer-teacher. Nonetheless, the more I improved, the narrower the definition became. Studio teacher morphed into University-Level Studio Pedagogy, capitalized here because of the grandeur with which I viewed it. And in order to have a university-level studio, I realized that I would need an international career. But all of this became far removed in my mind from 'music education' to the point that I refused to use this term to label my interest in teaching. 'Music teacher and music teaching' were exclusive to the percussionist-performer's domain of one-on-one studio teaching. Unfortunately, this image did not accurately represent everything that had originally been in my heart. I remember thinking at one point in my first or second year how much I would like to teach in a classroom setting but because I was a performer, I would only be able to teach in private settings. It now seems to me a pity and a shame that I did not (or could not) explore and challenge these thoughts at the time, but in my youth I felt that I was immune to the influence of others and the institution.

My later identity challenges regarding music education were largely overcome by exposure to experiences within the field and exposure to music education professionals whom I respected and with whom I identified. These professionals included teachers, professors, and both graduate and undergraduate music education students. For me, the distinction between these four areas was initially important because I saw them as having different roles and positions of status, boundaries that gradually lost their meaning.

A few notable events occurred at the same time that I was making the decision to switch to music education. One event was the new opportunity to teach music to young children, an experience that I came to treasure (much to my surprise at the time). I had also already been teaching percussion at a high school on a weekly basis. I frequently spoke with the music teacher and over time our discussions changed. And over time, I began to gain an awareness of and respect for her exceptional knowledge and well-crafted skills as a teacher. She was a passionate, talented music teacher and band director, all of which gave me a new model of 'high school band teacher'. Eventually she became my mentor, encouraging me to develop my conducting skills and inspiring me to want to follow in her footsteps. Another event was meeting a music education professor who guided me in my career direction when I was dealing with the crisis of my Masters degree. Her path was similar to mine: she had a

Masters in performance, decided to pursue both a PhD and Bachelors in music education and had eventually become a professor. Furthermore, her passion for research reignited my own academic tendencies. The new avenue that she showed me offered so many interesting possibilities. This interaction combined with my newly acquired large group, non-percussion teaching experience (music to young children) helped me form a new relationship with and enlarge the term 'music education'.

I had worked musical and non-musical jobs for two years between my Bachelors and Masters degrees and became immediately appreciative of any music-related job in the field that helped pay my rent. I patched together a series of jobs and realized the importance of a diverse profile in order to maximize "hireability." Conversely, I discovered the relative unimportance and inutility of an undergraduate music performance degree in the professional world, at least in the way I approached things. Nonetheless these experiences coupled with the eventual out-of school experiences that accompanied my graduate degrees allowed me to form new ways of being musical independent of the music school. Furthermore I witnessed other musicians with whom I worked living healthy, multi-faceted musical lives outside of the music school walls.

In addition to these experiences, the music school itself proved to be a place in which I could gently transition. The graduate coursework was fascinating and I had always been interested in education and learning theories. I also decided to take several of the undergraduate techniques courses, which were incredibly fun and allowed me to simply 'play' music (without having to prove myself or feel judged), which in turn renewed my own joy in playing and performing music on my primary instrument. Furthermore I was given the chance to teach two courses, one in theory and one in music education, which offered me new opportunities through which to expand my experience-based definition of teaching regarding subjects and settings (classroom and large lecture hall).⁸

Most of the music education professors at my university had been or continued to be performers.⁹ Moreover many of the other music education PhD students who had become close friends of mine also had their Masters in performance and each student had developed a very different relationship with performance. My understanding of what music education meant to me was appreciably challenged and developed throughout the long conversations with these peers of shared experiences and varying interpretations of those experiences. Furthermore, my friendship circles later grew to include undergraduate music education

students and our rich interactions have positively impacted my pride in being part of this group.¹⁰ In fact several of these students were older and had returned to music education after a few years' experience of performing and teaching in order to receive official certification. Our shared passion for music and education was reflected in our lively conversations.

The nature of my transitions can be represented by a Venn diagram of two interlocking circles with an overlap, or shared common ground. This common ground often granted me the permission that I needed in order to construct an integral definition of music education by using it to step from an already-accepted place of value to a new facet of music education. For example, conducting helped ease my transition into music education because it combined several of my musical interests: education, performance, composition (theory). Another example of a common ground was the actual PhD degree, combining education and academics, as the idea of pursuing doctoral studies had always been a goal of mine. Finally the people who I respected and who shared similar experiences with me (namely performance) were also proudly and positively involved with music education.

I am not what I do

In addition to the changing inter- and intra-personal challenges that I encountered on my identity journey, the daily struggle with time was (and continues to be) a constant challenge. My days are negotiated between teaching, academics, performance, and composition. When they are all vying for the same deadline, especially when an activity of one aspect ends up being sacrificed or canceled, frustration and inner discord ensue. Further exacerbating this problem is that each area requires a different kind of concentration, approach and routine. In fact, the very tone of this article changed across its various drafts depending on which musical endeavour was playing a more centered role in my life at a given time. Time more than any other challenge creates the most division. Nonetheless, I am hopeful while remaining skeptical when I read Bateson's words: "...we are nurtured by our work and that we can combine different kinds of tasks so that they feed each other—mostly—instead of competing" (1989, 238). I have found that the recent convergence of my musical identities supports a mutual nurturing, while perpetuating my musical curiosity and allowing me a freedom to act in a way that rings more true to who I am.

Now as I take inventory of the things that I do musically, I no longer have the same attachment to their labels. When asked in conversation, I often answer in terms of what I do (I

teach, I perform, I play music, I write, I compose) versus how I identify myself with these actions (I am a performer, I am a teacher, I am a scholar). I am not denying the need of some to label, nor the influence this can have on my own life. I understand that in our contemporary society many people feel personal allegiance to their career, or the career to which they inspire. Nonetheless, many people are able to see beyond labels.

I would like to bring awareness to some of the issues created by the institutionally-imposed divisions known as specialization—divisions that force music students to choose one musical act over another but do not reflect the broader reality of most professionals' musical lives (or acknowledge the almost limitless variations that are possible). It can be advantageous for a music education student to receive high level musical performance training and opportunities, or to seriously study composition and arranging. Likewise a course in pedagogy, including topics such as learning theories and metacognition, could be very useful for any performance major in their own studies, not to mention the likelihood that they will teach music at some point in their career. As musicians, we communicate music in numerous ways. Having the ability, understanding, or appreciation of various modes of expression can broaden our own experiences and give us access to potential benefits of collaboration with colleagues.

In allowing myself to have a more fluid sense of who I am, and in assuming a greater role in managing my own identity, I hope to provide an example of someone who eventually managed to compose her own life; a life that makes sense on a personal level, as opposed to one that blindly follows the outdated and sometimes nonsensical models promoted by most music schools. I respect the need for students and professors to work together toward the achievement of clear, common goals. What concerns me more, however, are the many students who need but are unable to see alternatives that lie beyond the identities rigidly circumscribed by existing disciplinary stereotypes—students who may wrongly conclude that they have little to offer the field of music.

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Notes

¹ My 'performance major shell' is similar to Roberts' (1993) discussion of Gordon's 1959 definition of "Front" (see pp. 102 & 129).

² I transferred schools in my third year.

³ No interaction is ever one-sided, and for that reason it would be appropriate to explain some of this teacher's reservations about my other interests. Like many well-meaning professors of performance, he was very aware of the fierce competition in the profession and the level of playing required to even have a chance of success. Furthermore, a Masters degree implies a high level of commitment and focus, which to some students and professors may seem at odds with (versus nurtured by) a varied portfolio. Therefore as a conscientious teacher, he probably felt that it would be irresponsible not to encourage complete concentration in the activities pertaining to my major.

⁴ Most notably with certain professors in performance and composition. And in her study on university level performer-teachers, Mills (2004) states that musicians who gain their income from teaching or administration may still regard themselves as performers. Roberts (1993) also supports this phenomenon.

⁵ I mention 'potentially saw' because at that time I did not feel ready to teach percussion, although it was part of what I was working towards.

⁶ It was the decrease of other life aspects, including academics, creativity and socializing, that was responsible for my unhappiness rather than the long practice hours, which I generally enjoyed. Therefore it was easy to justify the sacrifices since I was satisfied by my practice.

⁷ Not all percussion students behaved in this way toward me, I should add; and the percussion faculty did still give me performance opportunities.

⁸ Teaching a course (regardless of the content) at the university as a graduate student seemed to positively elevate my status as far as other students (regardless of their major) saw me.

⁹ I did not view this as a mandatory skill for music education professors, but it did help my initial ability to identify with a new career aspiration. One professor from a different university was an expert in identity and with whom I had several conversations in this regard.

¹⁰ I am completing a BMus Ed in addition to my PhD. The eventual decision to pursue the BMus Ed was a further reflection of my newly founded positive association with music education and ability to overcome my issues with this label.

About the Author

Gina Ryan has performed as a concert soloist, commissioning and composing over twenty-five works for solo percussion and percussion ensemble. She has taught as an instructor at McGill University and is presently completing her PhD in music education at McGill University.