



Conference Report

Society for Education, Music and Psychology Research (SEMPRE) 40th Anniversary Conference

Robert Fulford

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Society for Education, Music and Psychology Research (SEMPRE), Institute of Education, London, United Kingdom



Robert Fulford is a PhD student in Music Psychology at the Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester, UK. He previously studied Music with Education and Educational Psychology at the University of Cambridge. His current research focuses on interactive performance for musicians with a hearing impairment and is part of an AHRC-funded collaboration with the Acoustics Research Unit, University of Liverpool. He researches topics relating to music and deafness including cross-modal perception and communication in music and music perception using hearing aid technology. He is co-leader of the North-West Deaf Youth Orchestra run by the charity Music and the Deaf and is a British Sign Language user.

Email: Robert.Fulford@student.rncm.ac.uk

Introduction

This report provides a summary of the 40th Anniversary Conference of the Society for Education, Music and Psychology Research (SEMPRE)¹. The event was hosted by the Institute of Education in London on 14-15 September 2012 as a celebration of the society's achievements over the last 40 years. Distinguished members of the society were invited to share their experiences of establishing and running the society and its two journals, *Psychology of Music* (POM) and

Research Studies in Music Education (RSME). Alongside the usual papers and posters, discussions reflected on how social and political changes have impacted on research, education and the academic environment in which SEMPRE has operated over the years.

Conference programme

The conference was opened by Professor Graham Welch who introduced a special presentation entitled 'A History of the Society' with Doctors Charles Plummeridge, Gordon Cox, Desmond Sergeant (First Chair; Founding Editor POM 1973-78) and Lean Crickmore. Arnold Bentley, who set up twice-yearly conferences at the University of Reading, was acknowledged as a father figure of

¹ For the conference abstracts, see King and Himonides (2012). For the podcast of the 40th Anniversary Conference, see: www.sempre.org.uk/conferences/past-sempre-conferences/23-sempre-40th-anniversary

music education research. Dr Sergeant spoke about his proposal, in 1971-2, to establish a journal for research in music education and a society to support it. He confessed that Bentley had, initially, not liked the first name of the society which was 'Society for Research in Psychology of Music and Music Education' (SRPMME) but that it had gained over 500 subscribers by 1978. Leon Crickmore, who described the developments in the 1980s and 1990s, began with a song. It was a verse from the Harrow School Song, written in 1864, but relevant at this conference:

*Forty years on, when afar and asunder
Parted are those who are singing today,
When you look back, and forgetfully wonder
What you were like in your work and your play?*

Crickmore explained that the early desire to measure musical abilities coincided with new methods of statistical analysis and that Aubrey Hickman had provided access to a computer at the University of Manchester for this purpose. He highlighted tensions between psychological and educational approaches existing from the outset. Developments in the late 1990s included the formation of a contractual agreement with Sage publications for POM with Graham Welch as Chair and Susan Hallam as Editor. The society was renamed SEMPRES in 2002 and remained unique in encompassing the three disciplines of music, education and psychology. Music psychology grew beyond its initial focus on the measurement of musical ability and, with the incorporation of qualitative methods and social psychological perspectives, the gap between psychological research and educational practice narrowed. Crickmore stated that Bentley had never believed that research would transform practice, but instead, inform it. A detailed written account of SEMPRES's history can be found in POM (Cox, Crickmore, Plummeridge, & Sergeant, 2012).

The following keynote address by Professor Johan Sundberg summarised 40 years of research on the human voice in relation to the physiology of singing and vocal acoustics. Sundberg reminded us of Gunnar Fant's work describing the voice as both a source and a filter and discussed the myoelastic aerodynamic theory of voice production. Sundberg provided evidence that notes at peak phrase-points are often sung almost a semitone sharp, and concluded by posing the question, what does 'in-tune' actually mean when it comes to singing?

Past and present Editors of POM and RSME then gathered to discuss aspects of the journal article submission and publication process. The division between educational and (especially cognitive) psychological approaches was alleviated to some extent by the launch of RSME in 1993.

Professor Margaret Barrett explained that options for publication in music education had, until this time, been limited to the British Journal of Music Education or USA journals. Thus, RSME began as an Australian/Asia/Pacific journal and subsequently expanded with the important mandate to provide a means to disseminate 'quality, quali'[tative] research. Today, POM provides many modes of publication including reviews, short statements, theoretical articles and the 'online first' system, in addition to the traditional empirical papers (Lamont 2012). An increase from four to six issues per year in 2012 reflects the current volume of quality submissions. The way in which authors communicate with reviewers in the review process was considered. In sensitive situations involving criticism or perhaps even rejection, imagining that one is talking with one's reviewer, in person, perhaps over coffee can help to avoid disputes and difficulties! The advice was to remain positive, and ask oneself, 'why has the reviewer made this comment?' and 'what have I not explained clearly enough?'

In the parallel sessions that followed (and which were attended by the author), Professor Aaron Williamon presented a summary of research profiling musicians' physical and mental health. The issue of Noise-Induced Hearing Loss was raised in mention of the Hearing Awareness Scheme between the Royal College of Music (RCM) and the Ear Institute at University College London, as was recent research by the RCM and Royal Northern College of Music that gathered self-report data about the health of music students in UK conservatoires. It was argued that research into musicians' health and fitness levels must inform educational practice. Finally, Williamon demonstrated a new performance simulator being trialled at the RCM, complete with a virtual green room, stage and audience, enabling students to simulate performance scenarios and potentially reduce performance anxiety and enhance practice methods.

Afternoon presenters included Sagar Jilka (how do earworms start?), Larissa Morand (the effects of background music and noise on attention tasks in adults with William's Syndrome), Steve Brown (an exploration of antecedents to engagement in music piracy), Olin Parker (fusing psychology and music therapy with music education) and many others. Before the conference dinner, some reflections on music psychology research were given by Professor Alf Gabrielsson (SEMPRES Lifetime Achiever). Gabrielsson reiterated that music psychology remains on the periphery of general psychology, a field in which the arts barely exist. He suggested that researchers should make more use of phenomenological musical experiences as a way to

examine human musical behaviours. As an example, he shared his recent experiences of changes to his absolute pitch ability, such that he now consistently identifies notes one semitone higher than they are. One of my own participants related a similar story to me in an interview study about making music with a hearing impairment (Fulford, Ginsborg & Goldbart, 2011). It was interesting for me to discover a physiological explanation: hair cells in the cochlear naturally vibrate more slowly with age and resonate with sound waves that are lower in pitch while established neural links to labelling templates in the brain remain. I could not, however, find any studies examining subjective data of this phenomenon, so in that respect, it was a point well made.

Special issues of POM and RSME were presented by Louise Skelding of Sage publications at The Russell Hotel before dinner. The 40th Anniversary Commemorative Collection is a facsimile edition of POM containing papers individually selected by each previous Editor of the journal. The conference dinner was beautifully accompanied by Derek Paravicini alongside Adam Ockelford.



Photograph 1: Derek Paravicini playing the piano alongside Adam Ockelford at the conference dinner (photograph taken by Alex Lamont)

The next day began with a keynote by Professor Liora Bresler in which she drew on her international work in arts education. She proposed that the scholarship of education is not something that can be learned by reading a textbook. Researchers should ‘connect’ with their research, notice the detail and see relationships between the parts while also seizing the whole. She suggested researchers should move beyond subjective judgements, liking or not liking, and recognise that all (qualitative) research is, to some extent, ‘research’.

Parallel sessions followed, including presentations by Victoria Rowe and Susan Young

(pianists composing with interactive software), Simon Rose (utility of free improvisation within music education) and Susan Hallam (what predicts motivation for music-making in the long term?). John Sloboda and Alinka Greasley presented findings from an evaluation project about the motivations of 16-24-year-olds to attend classical concerts. With the average age of concert audiences well into the 50s, they proposed that a lack of knowledge and unwelcoming audience cultures are barriers for young people in the acquisition of the concert-going habit. Further presentations were given by Daniel Müllensiefen, who introduced The Goldsmiths Musical Sophistication Index, and Sarah Knight, who presented a case for the use and effects of entrainment processes in persuasive oratory. Renee Timmers (Hickman winner 2002) presented experimental data on the influence of emotions on our perception of music and fielded questions about the extent to which these effects are implicit or explicit: do people see a picture which induces a mood that, in turn, influences their choice? Or do people infer a mood from the music and consciously consider which choice is most appropriate?

There was a poster session in the afternoon before a film report by Professor John Baily (SEMPRE Ambassador for Afghanistan) and a special address by Isabel Cecilia Martinez and Favio Shifres, representing the Argentine Society for the Cognitive Science of Music. Jane Oakland also gave a report on SEMPRE’s research into funding for small research grants in the UK.

To the future

The final plenary was entitled ‘Current and Future Challenges in Research in Music Psychology and Music Education’ and was led by Professors John Sloboda, Graham Welch, Eric Clarke and John Baily. Welch began by placing the research fields within a wider context of global illiteracy: according to UNESCO there are 758 million illiterate adults in the world today. He proposed that music technology has the potential to address exclusion in society and I was reminded of the fact that 82% of deaf and hearing impaired children are now routinely educated in mainstream schools (CRIDE 2012) where access to music can remain problematic for them. Sloboda then acknowledged that although research findings take time to impact society at large, this may be letting music psychology off ‘a bit lightly’. It was agreed that musical listening behaviours are ubiquitous: psychologists can show that most of the equipment that humans need to perceive, and benefit from, music is innate. Educators implicitly capitalise on

this. Sloboda questioned the degree to which music psychology has positively affected understanding of music in society at large: the public may be aware of the ‘Mozart Effect’ but if music psychology did not exist, would they enjoy listening to music any less? Would composers compose less well? Would performers cease to perform? Professor Eric Clarke stated that there may be a danger in moving too quickly from a pre-paradigmatic, to a post-paradigmatic stage. He suggested that music psychology has generated relatively few paradigms, citing probe tones, priming, and the mapping of tempo and dynamics from performance. Perhaps we have turned away from them too soon, favouring new methods and abandoning the old? Perhaps we should, instead, hang on to them, critically evaluate and build upon them? There were many questions to ponder.

Methodologies and paradigms aside, it is generally agreed that the social impact of our research is important. But there is a tension between the idea that music is for everyone and the value placed on musical training. Perhaps researchers may not always sufficiently interrogate their motivations for researching human musical processes as these topics are naturally compelling to trained musicians. But, as Clarke stated, there is merit in pure academic enquiry and if research funding is to decline, then researchers must strongly identify how their proposed research contributes to nascent channels of impact in order to justify it in today’s uncertain climate. Perhaps reverence for musical talent and training has resulted in a potential to extend existing knowledge from our umbrella disciplines (be they psychology, education, philosophy, sociology or history) into musical domains, rather than creating entirely new epistemologies of musical behaviour.

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