Considering Techne in Popular Music Education: Value Systems in Popular Music Curricula

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Introduction

This chapter seeks to problematize the value systems attached to multivalent forms of making and playing music in popular music higher education curricula. Specifically, I seek to interrogate the application or "overlaying" of traditional conservatoire values and aesthetics onto popular music education. I argue here that whilst we might expect the advent of popular music as a realm of study and practice in higher education (HE) to precipitate a different ordering of knowledge (including its practical application), what has in fact occurred is the importing of values, practices, and aesthetics from the Western classical tradition.

There is both an epistemic and socioeconomic challenge in higher popular music education (HPME). Specifically, the problem is one of the professionalization or academicization of an essentially informal and amateur music making—what is popular music and what tools does one need to teach/learn it? The normative expectation that candidates wishing to study music in higher education in England and Wales are equipped with Western art music instrumental performance skills and music theory, is intimately bound up with the cultural mores and financial capacity of a specific and limited socioeconomic group.[1] Conversely, popular music in the public imagination is the realm of the youthful amateur, even when framed within the high-production values of twenty-first-century talent shows, that is, *X-Factor, The Voice*, etc. Indeed, it is the essentially "raw" or untutored voice or act that is presented and valorized as "authentic" in such shows.

Immediately then, in HPME, we appear to be colliding the aesthetic and political values of the conservatoire with those of the amateur realm and have not yet been able to reconcile the two. Traditionally, the academy valorizes and rewards displays of technical proficiency and expertise that can be framed within specific bodies of theoretical knowledge (e.g., Western music theory and notation), and yet many (successful) popular musicians claim or even make a badge of honour out of explicitly *not* "knowing what

they are doing" in terms of naming and describing their music through music theory. The binary of being able to read music staff notation or not is a key example of this, which then colors the learning, content, and focus of HE popular music programs. What criteria are applied to the construction of curricula and awards is tightly bound up with specific (but often unspoken) aesthetic, cultural, and political values. How popular music can be, and is, taught tells us a lot about the tensions between what different types of music learning and teaching are for, and which aspects of our cultural milieu they are in service to.

Broadly, the traditional conservatoire (whose etymology is fairly obvious) seeks to develop an individual's instrumental virtuosity in order to perform and thus conserve a canonical repertoire. Further, complexity and tension arises when subfields within popular music assume the same epistemic drive as the conservatoire—that is, whilst pop music's production and consumption is of a different history and order to Western art music, or "classical music," the models of music theory and repertoire can be applied (if so desired) in pop music; and with the same focus on the *individual* student-musician as the site of proficiency and virtuosity.

What end does the realm of popular music education that mimics the conservatoire serve? This being "in service" is important given the explicit instrumentalism (political rather than musical) that is at play in UK HE and beyond. The introduction (or in many countries, simply the existence) of tuition fees—which for the majority of students means taking on significant loan debt—has challenged traditional formulations of "education for education's sake." The use-value of degree-level education is now explicitly equated with cost and "value for money" in terms of career readiness and industry alignment. Yet another, older, value-system also abides; as Parkinson has noted "the practices, behaviours and ethos of the conservatoire are underpinned by beliefs regarding what a conservatoire is *for*" (Parkinson 2017: 145; emphasis in the original).

This use-value is freighted with centuries of accrued status and social capital that is, I would argue, even in this rarefied domain, positioned ultimately in terms of the status not of the performer—however virtuoso—but of their audience; their expertise is in service to the approving discernment of the listener. The audience of Western art music is essentially a person of high status, and their consumption of this music is a performance of status defined in terms of taste and discernment. What then does it mean to be preparing our graduate student-musicians for "professional" careers? Is our aim to enable *new* or *better* music to be made, and, if so, to whose criteria? Or are we preparing our student cohorts for a career as session musicians (these questions are also discussed by Moir and Stillie 2018).

The cultural realm

HPME is prone to a very public social instrumentalism in ways that other disciplines are not. There is a broad cultural understanding, however partial, of what a musician is and therefore what they should do. This cultural understanding exists in ways that do

not exist, for instance, with other humanities subjects such as geography, history, or classics. Popular cultural understanding of the term "musician" is freighted with notions of performance as opposed to making (i.e., composition) borne out of a long history of the (classically trained) musician as a performer of canonical repertoire. One only has to consider examples such as the BBC Young Musician of the Year to see that what is being valorized in the musician's toolkit or skillset is techne, "a practice of knowing by making manifest or bringing forth" (Gough and Wallis 2005: 7) in the ability to successfully render others' work. Thus techne—the skills used in service of performance—is a, if not *the*, key criteria for prestige and "quality." There is a passing nod in this realm to "interpretation" but this is more about the subtleties of phrasing, weight, tension, and release, rather than the wholesale (re)interpretation of canonical repertoire.

The codification of both the "quality" and "qualities" of UK music degrees has its most explicit location in the Quality Assurance Agency's Subject Benchmark Statements (QAA 2016).[2] I was invited to be a member of the 2016 review panel in order to broaden its representation to include both popular music and alternative providers (APs).[3] The work of the advisory panels to QAA Subject Benchmark Statements is both a political and ethical task. The broadening of recognized attributes and practices relating to music curricula is reflective of an expanded understanding and acknowledgement of what constitutes UK higher education music curricula. By including additional areas of content and forms of assessment to include more focus on both the process of making and self-reflection on this process, I would argue the panel challenged, at least in part, the received wisdom and orthodoxy of the discipline.

The postwar advent of popular music as a cultural phenomenon was, at least in part, a reaction to the stifling of the middle-class grip on taste and aesthetics, and was received or rejected in various quarters as very much so. The structural bias outlined above manifests as status anxiety in post-92 universities[4] and APs, with one of the responses being not only to mimic the "rigours" and "professionalism" of the conservatoire, but also of the aesthetic and cultural values: "Musicology should be about trying to discover why we like the things we do and how music works. Too often though, it is based on the assumption classical music is, by definition, of value, and that musicology's job is simply to demonstrate why"(Zagorski-Thomas 2016).

This anxiety is to some extent understandable, given the very public manifestation of the skills acquired through arts education; the arts being entwined in a braid of expectation, prestige, value, and reward. Ironically then, instead of opening up pop music education as a sociocultural place of difference, much of the philosophy of the APs of popular music education in the UK has is roots in a rote learning "rehearse and repeat" model of instrumental proficiency, borne out of a traditional "master/pupil" relationship of instrumental *training*, as opposed to a broader music education that seeks to question, test, and redefine what and how music is made and consumed. Techne here is proscribed and reductive rather than expansive and mutable; put simply "knob twiddling" or other forms of making/performing music are not considered within the realm of physical technique.

Music education pre-HE

Outwith the HE academy, but very much borne of and in service to the conservatoire, is a well-established system of music performance and theory examination. The exam models of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM), and latterly Rockschool Ltd, are exactly that tool; reinforcing and valuing particular realms of knowledge and skill borne of a very particular musical realm, with the examiner cast as a gatekeeper whose role is to preserve and reiterate the values of the ABRSM through assessment of the candidate. What is striking is that the expectations and values in play through the Rockschool exams are exactly those of their classical conservatoire peers. This formalization of informal music making brings with it an inherent conservatism. The surface aesthetic is altered—you play electric rather than Spanish guitar—but the form and content are essentially unaltered: perform rehearsed pieces, perform site-reading tasks, play scales and arpeggios. At no point does the Rockschool exam attempt to move the frame of reference for what is valued. There is no expectation of creativity—no interpretation, let alone performance of original work. I would argue that one of the reasons that the conservatoire-style music examinations shy away from assessing original creative output is that the binary of right note/wrong note is removed. The competencies on display in the performance of original work cannot be codified in such a simple way, and therefore the authorization and classification of a candidate having met a threshold standard is both more difficult and of less value.

Likewise, the expectation placed on student musicians at school leaver level to have a working knowledge of a *specific lexicon* of Western art music, through which to describe and scribe their music making, represents another codification and systemic exclusion. Given music's elision from many countries' national and local school curricula, there is little opportunity or provision for the training and scaffolding of learning needed to acquire this language and skills. For example, the UK GCSE (school-leaver) music syllabus requires candidates to have a working knowledge of terminology and feature such as: chromatic, continuo, drone, fanfare, ground bass, major/minor/modal, ornamentation, ostinato, pentatonic, sonata form, ternary, tesitura, etc. (Pearson Edexcel 2016). The privileging here of Western art music traditions fails to recognize and value a lingua franca of music players and makers from different traditions. The lack of parity of esteem for different epistemologies of music means that this is essentially esoteric and inaccessible to those candidates not in receipt of private lessons (see Chapter 14 in this volume).

It could be argued that popular music, and especially electronic or computer music, has its own, equally complex, lexicon, but this "other" (in every sense) music is elided in the traditional realm of musical knowledge. One has to go to publications that specifically address the "otherness" of electronic music in order to locate this list. What we find is a lexicon that would leave most GCSE woodwind players floundering: accelerometer, ADSR, amplitude, auxiliary send/return, band width, beat mapping, channel path, compression, DSP, equalisation, gates, impedance,
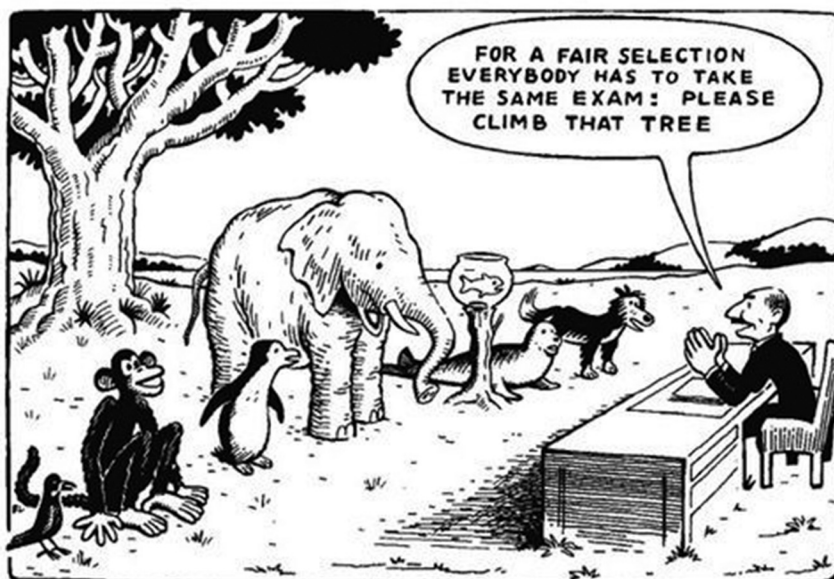
Figure 3.1 Hans Traxler (1983), "Equal Opportunity," in Michael Klant (ed.), *School Ridicule: Caricatures from 2500 Years of Pedagogy*, S. 25, Hannover: Fackeltraeger.

mastering, phase, and sampling (Shadow Producers 2017). If the above makes clear that we are talking here about *different* realms of knowledge, then the question must therefore be of parity of esteem. This is clear when we consider that the advent of electronic music programs in HE have been seen as "simply a means for attracting and holding onto less able students" (Pace 2015, quoted in Parkinson 2017). It is certainly the case that some applicants to HE will be "less able" to perform the traditional Western art music canon, but what of these other abilities, to make and perform other music? This scenario brings to mind the well-known cartoon critiquing "fairness" in assessment.

The social realm

The socioeconomic space necessary for access to and acquisition of particular skills, language, and sensibilities of the academy is ostensibly that of the middle classes. A cursory look at the key findings around socioeconomic data published in the UK's UCAS[5] *End of Cycle Report for Conservatoires* (UCAS 2015) offers stark evidence of the asymmetry of those applying to study at a UK conservatoire (including music, dance, and drama), revealing that "those from the most advantaged areas, who were aged 18 in 2014, were 4.8 times more likely to apply to undergraduate courses

through UCAS Conservatoires by the time they were 19 than those from the most disadvantaged areas. This is an increase from 4.2 times more likely for those aged 18 in 2013" (UCAS 2015).

The UCAS *End of Cycle Report* demurs from offering any comment or analysis on the structural reasons behind this disparity. Likewise, "differences by background persist for UCAS Conservatoires applicants to the courses in UCAS Undergraduate with the greatest appeal to UCAS Conservatoires applicants," i.e., the same division along social, economic, and ethnic lines can be observed in applications to those non-conservatoire music course, including popular music, which ostensibly retain the curricula of the conservatoire but writ in pop (scales, sight-reading, repertoire, music theory, canon, technique):

> The music, dance and drama courses in the UCAS Undergraduate scheme may be different in nature to those in the UCAS Conservatoire scheme, and may appeal to different applicants. Nearly three-quarters of applicants who apply through both UCAS Conservatoires and UCAS Undergraduate schemes in the same cycle make at least one application to a set of 20 courses in the UCAS Undergraduate scheme … these could be considered to be the courses with closest appeal to applicants considering applying to UCAS Conservatoires. (UCAS 2015)

Interestingly, the former, with their focus on instrumental prowess aligned with music reading skills, position students as performers of a musical canon, whilst the latter—partly because of the tools used and partly because of a different politic—have no part of their curriculum which valorizes repetition and interpretation of a canonical repertoire in performance. Yet, this world, of digital or computer-based music, is often characterized as being unoriginal and plagiarizing (through the use of sampling). There is a categorical difference between the production of new music which sounds "unoriginal," i.e., that it is overly derivative, and the removal of the expectation of originality and, indeed, the valorizing of the performance as facsimile.

If music teaching and learning is elided in the compulsory education sector then individuals and groups will purse the music education that they know and valorize—with the corollary that the aesthetics, value systems, and materials of those different social and cultural groups will be reified. Whilst this might be considered "natural" or even desirable, the concomitant effect is that, when mobilizing the skills, aesthetics, and values of those groups to gain access to a formal HE setting, the threshold competencies, expectations, and abilities will be brought to the fore. The systematic removal of music (and the arts in general) from the UK compulsory education curricula (Burns 2017) leads to segregation, and the asymmetries inherent in that term, of both aspiration and access to music education and practice. HPME then is unable to build access for all, because the threshold standards necessary to gain access to, for instance, a traditional

conservatoire program will only have been developed in students from a particular socioeconomic milieu. This clearly does not mean that certain groups do not have the individual *capacity* to acquire certain skills or knowledge, but that this knowledge realm is probably occluded from them, in general, due both to a lack of agency and capacity to afford (in money, time, social value), and a lack of interest (i.e., value placed in) acquiring those skills.[6]

The cultural value realm

An analogy of the argument herein can be drawn with sports, and their place in both the amateur and professional realms, and the different aesthetics and expectations, regarding their value and use, within and outwith education. Both sport and the arts (music, in this context) have a place in popular culture as amateur pastimes; from ancient Greece to post-Blairite instrumentalism, idea(l)s of self-improvement, sociability, and staying out of trouble are reworked as being "useful" and contributing to society; especially when focused on young people. At the other end of this spectrum of sociocultural understanding of sport and music is the notion of "high-performance" as located in the professional realm, not as a cultural act to be framed and observed through the lens of ethnography or sociology, but as a space freighted with values of performance most often linked to numerical proxies, whether a world-record time or a chart-topping hit, it's the numbers that ascribe and describe success. Here then we find performance inscribed with excellence, industry, and capital. The question (as with its cultural relation, sport) of what music is for, and thus how it is measured, is paramount in developing our cultural understanding of use-value. This use-value plays a significant role in how and where we locate and identify music in our society, cultural milieu, and educational contexts. The reward (and concomitant threat) in understanding performance not as a diverse ecology and differing practices and outputs, but as a hierarchy of quality is, I would argue, carried through in a double meaning of "performance" in the context of traditional HE music programs; most explicitly in their criteria for entry. As the title of John McKenzie's book commands: "Perform or Else" (McKenzie 2001).[7]

What then, in this context, does it mean for the musician to "perform" twice-over, or in two realms? Is the performance of music, by itself, enough of a performance, or does the imperative for "high-performance" (through either technical prowess or commercial success) color the first, essential, sense of playing music? The suggestion here is that the binary amateur/professional might actually be describing "performance" (in McKenzie's terms) outwith music. Moir (2016) considers the binary of amateur/professional an unhelpful delineation, as "there is no contradiction in amateurs mimicking the behavior of professionals" (234). But which "behaviors" are we discussing—if the behaviors are those of placing one's music in a commercial context, then surely it is not the musicianship or stagecraft which are being mimicked but the business behaviors of "professionalism"?

Within this, second McKenzian "performance" we might consider the commercially inclined imperative of sharing ones "amateur" music output via gigs, recordings, and other media. Moir usefully describes this as "the phenomenon of young people (particularly those in full-time education) voluntarily using their free time to engage in activities that are generally undertaken as part of the employment obligations of professionals in the creative industries" (234). We see here that is it the *context* of music making and dissemination that ascribes professionalism, not the standards and levels of techne on display. Let's look further at these contexts of music-making and the values ascribed to their different loci.

Popular music techne and habitus

The places and environments of music production and performance, and the differing cultural status of these places, are extremely important in signaling, both to the musician and their audience, what realm of the professional we are in. The small gig venue is a key site of the formative experiences and initial steps on the journey of the popular musician. The aversion of policy makers to taking this place seriously as a cultural site of production is related, at least in part, to their often being in or part of pubs (Parkinson et al. 2015). The pub is not a serious place, for serious things to happen, but is the watering hole of the working class and, importantly, *young* people. Put simply, how can young people in a pub be doing anything culturally worthwhile? In our report *Understanding Small Music Venues* (Parkinson et al. 2015) the experiences of promoters in these contexts is clear—they are up against a tide of gentrification, housing development, and licensing laws which, if not designed directly to undermine and threaten such venues, certainly do not valorize them as important sites of cultural engagement and production.

We see above that the value placed on the loci and habitus of the production and reception of music—in the social, economic, and cultural context in which we live—is unevenly distributed. This asymmetry highlights a lack of parity of esteem for certain skills and ways of doing in the realm of popular music, which is also present in our formalized learning and teaching of popular music. Teaching popular music in higher education has been braided together with expanded notions of the tools and techniques required to make and disseminate music—a more explicit focus on the vocational context of popular music can be seen to both encompass the project of (1) widening participation, and (2) employability—the student as an independent (yet networked) self-starter:

> the implicit message is that participation in HPME comes with the responsibility to accrue industrial skills and commercial nous. HPME's roles as a champion of widening participation, and as a driver of economic

> growth, can thus appear woven together. HPME's overwhelming representation in England and Wales' Post-92 sector, which has accounted for the bulk of widened participation and is also associated with industry-facing disciplines, foregrounds this dual purpose. (Parkinson 2017: 14)

The conservatoire turns a blind eye to this—producing players of the highest technical quality who can then fight it out amongst themselves for the few openings and opportunities that exist in a limited field; however dynamic the repertoire, the orchestra is often framed as a place of, at the very least, steady state behavior, with little change and dynamism in terms of continuing professional development. In a *Guardian* article from more than ten years ago, Morris Stemp, then second violinist with the Halle Orchestra reported that "he may have loved the heat of performing live, but he didn't like the lack of prospects for promotion and the anti-social hours. Or the pay, of course. After 15 years at the top of his profession, four years at music college and a lifetime of playing the violin, his salary was £25,000" (Price 2006).

This anecdotal story not only recounts a depressing story about the economic value placed on professional musicians, but also highlights the failure of professional orchestras in their social and public responsibility to build diverse and dynamic communities, ecologies, and practices of music where a plurality of roles, repertoire, and audiences can exist. If this is the case for a highly-unionized workforce employed in a locus of high cultural capital, then what chance is there for the popular musician?

> the employability agenda dictates that undergraduate degree programmes should simultaneously equip students for financially sustainable careers and meet the demands of industry. In the case of HPME, this might be seen to favour curricula orientated towards the economic logics of a commercial industry that thrives on that which is "popular" in the quantitative (profit-generating) sense, as opposed to curricula that prioritize aesthetic and cultural value, understood in intrinsic terms. (Parkinson 2017: 14)

But what of those musicians who are making music and developing entrepreneurial and industry skills outwith the academy? The dynamism of the early-millennial east London grime scene is a case in point—built around self-starter collaboration, informal economies, and quotidian making-do, which saw the creation of a vital new musical genre and scene, none of which explicitly or systematically touched or was touched by HE pop music.

Whilst working at the University of East London from 2006 to 2013 this explosion in new music production and consumption, or indeed the creation of a new and vital habitus,[8] was going on right under our noses. Yet I would argue that we, along with other higher education institutions (HEIs) failed to fully engage and take account

of this burgeoning scene. The university's role in "the distribution of the sensible" (Ranciere 2004) revealed that the academy found it difficult to bridge both the physical and conceptual gaps between the institution and its locus (and habitus). Grime music might have been being made in the immediate vicinity of the university, yet we failed to authorize this new genre as it occurred, never mind being part of the ecology that enabled it to flourish. The music sociologists and cultural theorists—interestingly, those people who were at the forefront of the introduction of pop music to HE (Zagorski-Thomas 2016), albeit from the critical distance of "studies"—failed to properly account for grime in their archaeology of the recent past. A truly dialogic engagement with an emerging form proved too challenging, even when faculty members were well-established label owners and producers. This suggests that the academy has a structural issue with community engagement were the community might be more adept in its practices and habitus than the institution.

What does this mean then for both the setting of threshold standards for entry to a HPME music program and its concomitant curricula focus? As a tool for the selection of applicants to HE music programs, the audition is the shibboleth of the traditional HE music programs in both conservatoires and other music and popular music programs, which place emphasis on traditional instrumental prowess and knowledge of music theory. Whilst it may be desirable to build student cohorts with similar baseline competencies, the lack of both equality of opportunity and parity of esteem perpetuates a systemic violence. A curriculum to which only those students with the resources to access private music lessons are granted entry is not inclusive. Whilst the proliferation of music programs might be seen to mitigate issues of access, the lack of parity of esteem for different sorts of music making is troubling. Popular and electronic music courses are seen as the "easy" option, "mopping up" those unequipped with a very partial and particular "other" (better) musical skill set (Parkinson 2017).

This lack of parity of esteem across different types of music program is replicated in the attitudes and opinions regarding the "quality" of different universities.[9] Regardless of the ever-increasing regulatory and quality assurance burden placed on HEIs, the narrative persists that the post-92s are simply poorer (in every sense) versions of those universities that do not have a history as polytechnics. The Labour peer Lord Adonis is, as I write, engaged in a provocative media campaign slurring the post-92s and attempting to influence the (Tory) government's narrative by proposing that "former polytechnics should lose [their] university status" (Adams 2017). The damage that this public betrayal of the contemporary UK university ecology does is both at an institutional and subject level. Fortunately there are opposing voices to this provocation, from the *Guardian*'s own Peter Scott (Scott 2012). However, we can see from the date above that Adonis and his ilk are, in some respects, in the ascendancy. Claims of quality are masking deep-held beliefs about exclusivity and exclusion, and norm-referenced access to a limited HE pool. This insinuated removal of opportunity for many students would of course adversely affect those in the lowest socioeconomic groups.

Two challenges thus present themselves here—firstly, the limited capacity to build a truly broad and inclusive HE music curriculum with access for all; secondly, the types of music being made and the skills necessary to make such music are being segregated and, thus, esteemed in differing ways, and quite explicitly reinforcing cultural and socioeconomic asymmetries present in broader society.

Conclusions

Returning to the challenges laid out in the opening of this chapter, what conclusions might we draw from the description of a divided and divisive music education sector in which HPME is seen in pejorative terms in relation to its authorized sibling of classical music? If we are to properly value both the diversity of prior-experience of the music candidate and of a music curricular offer which responds to that diversity, we need to reimagine the scene not as a competition but as a festival. This more ecological approach enables differing scales, registers, and practices of music to be valued in *co-relation to*, rather than *competition with*, one another. This ecology must be both horizontal (i.e., acknowledging and developing differing practices and aesthetics *at the same time*) and vertical (i.e., acknowledging and developing differing practices and aesthetics *through time*).

However, what this does not capture is the potential or desire for mobility *across and between* practices of music making and education; not as a standardizing agglomeration but as true diversity—a salad not a soup! One of the major challenges to this cross-pollination and interplay is that music is an embodied practice, its techne explicit and on display. We have seen above that the "how" of making and performing music reifies certain sensibilities and aesthetics, which emerge from differing contexts and value systems. These diverse ways of manifesting and valuing music need to be supported and interrogated through music education in our schools' curricula; its elision is an act of structural violence that at once resigns the development of particular (classical) musical skills and sensibilities to a life-lottery, whilst also devaluing music making outside of the classical paradigm. It is essential that the opportunities to engage in music making are scaffolded right through compulsory education, and that the value systems in play recognize different manifestations of music, musicality, and musicianship.

Notes

1 Whilst we might include Scottish higher education institutions (HEIs) in general here, they are prone to a different school curriculum and higher education quality assurance regime.

2 The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) is the UK's HE quality assurance body. It is an independent, not for profit organization that acts on behalf of HE providers and the government

to ensure academic standards. Two main areas of practice are the Quality Code and the Subject Benchmark Statements. See QAA n.d.

3   "Alternative Provider" is the UK nomenclature for privately owned higher education institutions.

4   The Further & Higher Education Act 1992 enabled former polytechnics to attain university status and degree-awarding powers. All did, with only Anglia Polytechnic University retaining the word "polytechnic" in its title. In 2005 it became Anglia Ruskin University.

5   UCAS is the UK Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, which operates the application process for UK higher education. Their annual *End of Cycle Report* analyzes a range of applicant data, including socioeconomic status (known as POLAR3 methodology).

6   The inverse of this is the democratizing effect of the comparatively cheap and easy-to-access tools—both hardware and software—necessary for computer music-making (or production, as common HE parlance confusingly calls it).

7   McKenzie traces the ascendency of "performance" as a term in business, technology, and beyond, and interrogates the links between the ethnographic imperatives of performance studies and the imperative assigned to abstract cultural objects (including pharmaceutical, technologies, and businesses) to "perform."

8   Habitus might be considered as "embodied ways of being"—our physical, mental, moral, and attitudinal dispositions—that are shaped through habituation. See Bourdieu 1984.

9   As divided down the Russell Group/post-92 paradigm.

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