

The Foundation Degree in Popular Music – The Colchester Experience

(slide 1)

In 2001 Colchester Institute was the first college in the country to offer a Foundation Degree in Popular Music. Colchester Institute has a long pedigree, going back over 30 years, of offering FE and HE courses in classical music but popular music has only been part of the suite of courses in recent years. By 2001 the FE level provision had been established for 4 years and it seemed an opportune moment to provide a degree level course. The advent of the Foundation Degree provided an opportunity to create a new course, which would run beside the established BA Hons Music eventually meeting with it in the third year. This paper will consider some of the issues that have arisen in the assessing of performance within the FdA Popular Music.

The Course Design

The Foundation Degree is designed to provide a broad, vocational, education which will prepare students for a variety of careers within popular music. The main areas covered are: performance, music technology, composition and music business. Central to the design of the course is work-based learning. Work experience modules form the core of the course and all other modules feed into these modules. (Slide 2, Slide 3) It is not primarily a performers course, but all students study performance and are expected to be able to perform publicly. The work experience has been most successful where it ties in directly with one of the four areas of study for example performing within a working band, working in music management or live sound engineering.

Assessing Popular Music – The Foundation Degree Experience

The first three intakes can be analysed as follows in terms of their main interests. The final column indicates that at this stage with the present Year 1s there isn't enough evidence to show which direction they may be going in. (slide 4)

Year	Performers	Composers	Technologists	Business	Not sure
2001	4		1		
2002	12	1	2	1	
2003	10	2			7

The Performance Modules

The two modules are 20 credits each and run long thin. The Learning Outcomes for Level 1 are: (slide 5)

<p>On successful completion of this modules students will be able to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Demonstrate the consolidation of skills achieved prior to entry2. Demonstrate a high level of musicianship with appropriate repertoire3. Demonstrate an awareness of the requirements and demands of instrumental/vocal technique and its application in performance4. Demonstrate the ability to relate an understanding of historical and musical context to performance.

It is taught through 20 one to one lessons with an instrumental or vocalist specialist and 24 two-hour workshops.

Assessing Popular Music – The Foundation Degree Experience

The assessment is made up of two equally weighted practical examinations: A Solo Performance and a Group Performance. Both take place at the end of semester 2.

The Learning Outcomes for the Level 2 module are: (slide 6)

On successful completion of this modules students will be able to:

1. Demonstrate a practical understanding of style and interpretation through solo and group performance
2. Demonstrate an awareness of musicianship and technique through the exploration of appropriate repertoire
3. Demonstrate a proficiency of performance skills appropriate to a semi-professional standard
4. Demonstrate the ability to continue an assessed course of practical musical study.

The teaching is the same as Level 1, but the assessment is in three parts:

- A reflective practice journal,
- A Technical Examination
- A single practical examination demonstrating solo and group performance.

Both modules are very open in nature and based on the model of the classical music performance modules that we have been delivering and assessing for many years. This was deliberate. Much discussion of possible 'pop music' approaches eventually led to an agreement that many of the fundamental criteria for successful performance are the same: (slide 7)

A secure and flexible technique

Convincing musicianship, which incorporates a secure sense of style

A confident and convincing stage presence

Excellent communication skills

A well-constructed programme or set

The fourth Outcome in the Level 2 module seeks to address one other aspect which is the student's ability to develop as a musician.

Observations on the Experience

The Students (slide 8)

Group Performance

This should be the most straightforward aspect of assessment in popular music since most forms of popular music are essentially a group performance idiom. With few exceptions most performance involves more than one person. For drummers and bassists their main role is as ensemble performers, however for singers, pianists and guitarists it may not be. The singers have found this particularly difficult because in most cases they are the soloists in a band. Backing vocals rarely feature in student bands, and when they do it tends to be instrumentalists doubling on vocals. Similarly some guitarists are primarily soloists, either as lead players or as acoustic or classical guitarists. Pianists may not belong to a band. They may be entirely soloists. All of these scenarios have been presented to us. The usual result is that the singers cope by performing some backing vocals for each other but the pianists and guitarists do less well. They tend to form ad hoc bands simply for the purpose of assessment. The results are usually poor.

Band performance is complicated by the nature of the student intake. Some come from significant distances and thus leave all of their musical contacts behind. Even those who live more locally may not have a functioning band outside college. Some come to the course with considerable gigging experience, others with very little. While our FE level course puts the students together into bands, this course does not. Recruitment would be

significantly complicated by a requirement that we must have 4 drummers, 4 bassists, 8 guitarists, and 4 singers in every cohort. Those students who have 'outside' bands are allowed to use these for assessment purposes. This has for the most part been successful, though in at least one case some of the members of the outside band were so poor that it adversely affected student's performance and thus grade.

Solo Performance

Solo performance was, we knew, going to be difficult. Not everyone is a soloist. How does a bassist demonstrate solo ability for example? If they are a highly technical player then perhaps there is a way forward for them, and we have seen this. However, the usual approach has been for them to undertake such misguided projects as performing Bach Cello Suites on the electric bass. Similarly pianists and guitarists have tackled classical repertoire with a singular lack of success. The problem here is that they simply do not understand the repertoire or have the technique to produce a musical performance.

Further problems have arisen when the teachers of pianists and guitarists have set them classical repertoire, perhaps to broaden their musical horizons, perhaps to develop particular techniques, or perhaps because that is what the teacher knows and understands. These students usually produce performances which, although excellent in demonstrating the learning which has taken place are at a relatively low standard. They may indeed be musically satisfactory, but at only Grade 3 or 4 standard of difficulty.

A further interesting dilemma has been the case of what we might call the 'lounge pianist'. Although this is certainly part of the popular music field, and an important source of income for many, it is normally intended to remain in the background. When presented as a solo performance it can be boring and lifeless. This may not be because either the technique or the musicianship is lacking – it may simply be a reflection of a clear understanding of the

repertoire and context of performance. How should it be assessed? On one occasion when assessing a lounge singer/pianist act we took the assessors out to the hotel. Trying to assess such a performance in 'exam' conditions usually leads to low marks for the student, whereas it may work very well in the environment for which it is intended.

Finally, there is the question of the singer-songwriter. This is an important genre within popular music, one that appears to be on the ascendant once again. In many cases neither the voice nor the accompanying instrument is strong from a solo point of view. There are many examples of compelling performers who are not known for their quality of vocal production or excellence of instrumental ability. (Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen to name but two) In these cases the sum is greater than the parts. We have discovered that to try to assess either the guitar or the voice in some cases disadvantages the student.

Assessors (slide 9)

Two particular problems have arisen in relationship to the assessors. The first is knowledge of repertoire and style.

The longer that one studies popular music at this level the more that one becomes aware of the vastness of the repertoire. Compared to other forms of music it may be superficially simple, but to understand it in any depth requires a great deal of time, effort and listening. Each year as new students arrive they bring a whole new repertoire. How is one to keep up? At the same time the field is so vast in terms of stylistic variety that it is impossible to be cognisant of all styles, genres and sub-genres, let alone understand them to the extent to be able to make competent value judgements. There is the further complication that popular music is a genre that is associated with youth culture, and with each year as we the lecturers and assessors grow older we grow farther away from that culture.

Assessing Popular Music – The Foundation Degree Experience

To assess a performance of popular music one needs to understand the style being performed. More than that, one needs to know the actual music being performed. The case of the performance of 'covers' is an interesting one. How is it possible to assess a student performance of Cream's version of 'Crossroads' without knowing the original in some detail? Without this knowledge it would not be possible to assess whether the student is performing an exact cover of Eric Clapton's solos, or is improvising in a style that is convincingly close to the original. If one didn't know the original at all what would be one's criteria?

This is an obvious example, a very well know piece of what we might call 'standard repertoire'. The difficulty is that while as an examiner one might know this particular piece reasonably well, in some cases one might have never heard of the band let alone the song being presented for assessment. In assessing classical music the answer is the score. Here we have a blue print for the music, and it is possible to assess music which one has never heard before with a significant degree of confidence in one's judgements by reading the score. The obvious solution would be that every student would have to submit in advance recordings (since they are the score) for every item that they are going to perform so that the examiners could learn them before hand. The time implications of this are enormous.

The same problem arises with original material. In this case it is even harder to make judgements about the success with which the performance has been realised. Unless the examiner has been given recordings before hand, or has been to rehearsals it will be difficult on a single hearing to make informed and accurate critical judgements. Even simple music requires repeated listening to be fully appreciated. Furthermore, there is the question of how original the music actually is. Popular music rests on an aural tradition of adaptation. Nothing is really new; it is a particular reworking of many influences and experiences that results in the composition of a new song. If the assessor does not recognise the influences can they make an informed judgement about whether this was indeed 'an imaginative performance showing excellent understanding'?

The second major issue from the Assessors point of view is that of sound quality. In classical performance the performer is entirely in control of their own sound and responsible for their own sound quality and balance with other musicians. In popular music performance this is not normally the case. The sound that we hear is amplified and controlled by a sound engineer. Thus questions of balance and tonal quality are decided by someone other than the performer. Furthermore, what the performer hears on stage is also outside their control. Even in the case of a fully miked system with multiple foldback speakers the sound on stage may bear little resemblance to the sound that is heard by the audience. As assessors of popular music we therefore need to ensure that examination is carried out in a way that approximates as nearly as possible the live performance. Good sound systems, with skilful engineering are prerequisites. Even with good systems it is difficult to make judgements on the quality and balance of sound. Inexperienced assessors may well be over harsh assuming that problems arise from the performer rather than the system or the venue. Judgements, however, must be made.

The Venue (slide 10)

The third issue relating to assessment that has arisen is the venue. At Colchester we have a small concert hall that serves all styles of music for performance and assessment. While it is very favourable to most classical music it is far too resonant for popular music and lacks full stage lighting. As you will see from this evening's performance, it can be made into a reasonably appropriate venue for popular music performance. Even so, sound engineering is difficult and the results are not always as 'professional' as we would like. The alternative is to have all such assessments at outside venues, in our case The Colchester Arts Centre or The Soundhouse. There are cost implications in each, and as they are commercial venues even if we had the money it would be difficult to book enough time for all the examinations. This must be a problem that other institutions face.

Assessing Popular Music – The Foundation Degree Experience

The time of day for assessment has developed as an important issue. Examination periods tend to be very difficult to timetable with up to 150 students needing to be examined in a three-week period. It is simply not possible to give everyone an optimum time, therefore some will have to be examined at unsociable hours such as 9.30 am. This clearly disadvantages students who are asked to perform 'evening' music in the morning. For final year recitals we use evenings only and try to set up a 'concert' situation for the students. The Performance Project module in BA III stipulates that the student must set up the assessed performance as a gig at an appropriate venue. Does this approach have to work back down through to Year 1 level?

Perhaps the answer is that all such assessments should be set up as a gig so that the students have the advantage of an evening time, a full sound and light system and an audience with which to relate. That is what we have arranged for this evening. Is this the model for the fairest way to assess?

Assessment Criteria

After much review of different possible criteria it was decided to use the generic assessment criteria already existing for the BA Hons Music, but omitting the criteria relating to programme notes. There are two sets of criteria, those for performance that is an interpretation or realisation of either existing or original music, and those for performances containing substantial elements of improvisation.

The First Class descriptors for each are:

(slide 11)

Solo Instrumental and Vocal Performance - Level 1

At Level 1 examiners would expect to find features such as the following:

First Class

- A most secure performance with real evidence of performer capability
- A compelling sense of musicianship which already displays maturity and great potential
- A demanding and varied programme, some of which is given from memory
- An assured presentation with a distinct sense of communication and ownership

(slide 12)

Solo Instrumental and Vocal Performance - Level 2

At this level, examiners would expect to find features such as the following:

First Class

- A most secure performance which is confidently delivered
- Imaginative interpretation showing excellent understanding
- A balanced and varied programme, some of which is given from memory
- A confident stage presence and very good sense of communication.

(slide 13)

Solo Instrumental and Vocal Performance (Improvised) - Level 1

At this level, examiners would expect to find features such as the following:

First Class

- A most secure performance with real evidence of performer capability
- Stylistic awareness is clearly evident in sound, phrasing and groove; improvising is fluent and demonstrates a working musical vocabulary
- A demanding and varied programme, some of which is given from memory
- An assured presentation with a distinct sense of communication and ownership

(slide 14)

Solo Instrumental and Vocal Performance (Improvised) - Level 2

At this level, examiners would expect to find features such as the following:

First Class

- A most secure performance which is confidently delivered
- An expressive performance with a convincing sense of style; musical aims are served by a fluent vocabulary and a variety of approaches to improvisation
- A balanced and varied programme, some of which is given from memory
- A confident stage presence and very good sense of communication

By comparison, here are the criteria set out by Rock School. (slide 15)

Rock School Assessment Criteria for Performance

Grades 6 & 8

- Effortless techniques
- Fluent use of vib., staccato etc.
- Distinctively musical rhythm/pulse/duration
- Seamless sync; effortless continuity
- Highly assured professional performance
- Native level of stylistic awareness
- Extensive and & individual improvisations

These criteria are by no means ideal, many of the statements are hard to interpret in the context of popular music, however, they have provided statements that have helped examiners to make judgments. The Rock School criteria seemed too specific to the particular instruments and style to be of use.

Some of the criteria seem, on reflection, to be almost unattainable at the level for which they apply. The second criterion for Level 1, 'A compelling sense of musicianship which already displays maturity and great potential', seems very

optimistic for example. Notwithstanding we have seen performances which have met these criteria.

Conclusions – (for the most part not yet conclusive)

(slide 16)

We are now in the third year of the delivery of the course. It has proven successful and we expect it to continue to grow. Five other colleges within the APU Regional University are planning to offer the course in the coming two years. The potential now exists for a vibrant regional network with regional tours and other links.

The teaching and assessment of performance remains a challenge. We have introduced several changes in approach and expect more to come as we gain experience.

The first major change has been the introduction of the 'singer songwriter' or 'singer self-accompanist'. We now offer students the option of two half hour lessons, one on voice and one on an accompanying instrument. This has been received with considerable enthusiasm by both staff and students. We know from workshop performances that there are several students who can produce very strong performances as a solo performer well above the level that we would expect from them as performers on either voice or guitar/piano. The Assessment Criteria would appear to be relevant to this type of performance so there may not even be the need for a revised version.

The lack of performance experience and the difficulty that some students have in getting experience prior to gigging publicly has been an area of concern. This is being addressed for the most part through the Workshop. The Workshop, which started in a hut, moved to the Hall in the second year, but at 9.00 in the morning is now on a Thursday afternoon. We try to ensure that stage lighting and full sound systems are used each week so that

Assessing Popular Music – The Foundation Degree Experience

students get more experience in performance conditions. Many of the students who come to us straight from Further Education have little experience of performance. We have also introduced Peer Assessment into these sessions using a simple form. This is formative and not officially recorded; it is for the benefit of the performers.

We haven't answered the questions raised about the lounge pianist, and the provision of pre-assessment recordings. As our assessors gain more experience with popular music assessment we hope that their enhanced understanding of style and genre will make the assessment fairer and at the same time more objective.

In the past year we have made some investment in sound systems, and are presently producing bids for a full professional standard sound rig. In the meantime we hire systems in whenever needed. I do not think that this can apply for all examined performance, as it would be prohibitively expensive.

Further capital bids are being raised to refurbish the Hall so that it can be more flexibly used as both a classical music and popular music venue.

(slide 17)

This evening you will have the opportunity to hear three bands perform in a public concert. They represent Foundation Degree 1, Foundation Degree 2 and BA (Hons) Music 3. The Geoff Clark Band are all members of FdA 2 and have formed this band while on the course. The Purple LowTones formed original while all three band members were students here on the Access to Music FE course. They have spent the past year writing, rehearsing, recording and gigging. The singer and guitarist, Martin, is now on FdA 1. Nu Blues is the band of the guitarist Ramon. Ramon is one of our first FdA graduates and is now on BA3, along with one other member of the band, Rhett. The challenge of the evening is to consider these performances and the assessment criteria which relate to them. Then on Friday morning there will be the opportunity to discuss the many issues that arise.