

**Report for Palatine April 2009**

## **Becoming reflexive practitioners – exploring the role of summative assessment in encouraging vocal skills in first year undergraduate singers**

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1. Introduction
2. Over-view of current practice in Higher Education Institutions
3. Research Questions
4. Research Methods
5. Questionnaire results
6. First interviews
7. Diaries and final interviews
8. Reflexive practitioners
9. Vocal identity
10. Physical health and vocal maturity: why singers are a special case
11. The role of summative assessment
12. Points of interest for University of Chichester
13. Conclusion
14. References

# 1. Introduction

This research study was prompted by my concerns as a performance tutor that some of the singing students were not developing as reflexive practitioners and that some of the singers resorted to singing songs in the end of semester assessments they had learnt prior to coming to University. I felt that somehow I had failed them because they were not using the new repertoire we had been learning and they were not using the new technical skills I was trying to establish. It seemed to me that they lacked sufficient reflexive skills to make judgements about their vocal development. The thought of the assessment at the end of sixteen weeks resulted in their choice of what they saw as their 'fail-safe' option of singing something that had already been deemed successful, sometimes it was the audition piece that they had performed nearly a year previously.

Unlike many instrumentalists who have built up a long relationship with their instrument through years of study by the age of 18, singers are often only just beginning to establish a sense of 'who they are' with their adult voice. From my own research I was aware that a sense of vocal identity starts to become established towards the end of the adolescent phase. I wanted to explore this aspect of singer's vocal development and to find out what role the process of assessment had in developing vocal identity at undergraduate level. The themes of developing reflexive practitioners and the role of the summative assessments form the focus of this study.

Recent studies of undergraduate assessment in musical performance in higher education (Hunter, 2004, Pitts, 2002) have identified the need to develop reflexive practitioners. There has also been research in the way musicians achieve excellence in performance and the various skills that can be taught (Jørgensen, 2004, Gruzelier & Egner, 2004, Connolly & Williamon, 2004). The research draws on my previous investigations of singers' reflexivity (Monks, 2001, 2003, 2007), where a notable mismatch between self-perceived vocal quality and the appraisal of the voice from

recordings was identified in a variety of singers aged 11-65 years and where I identified different prototypes of vocal identity, performer, creator, explorer.

## **Research into reflexive student learning**

Much of the research suggests that higher education should be developing reflexive practitioners. Hunter (2004) believes in a ‘multi-dimensional approach to assessment, which ensures that the learning opportunities are maximised.’ He argues that ‘by conducting process/progress assessment through self-evaluation, learners are encouraged to reflect on their learning habits and develop self-awareness.’

Burwell (2003) identified that singers seemed to have different requirements, she found that the teaching of singing ‘seems quite distinct from other “instruments”’, when analysing 1-1 teaching at Higher Education level.

## **Assessment at Higher Education Level**

An article in *The Independent* in March 2007 highlighted the differences between conservatoire and university music education and it stressed the new complexity of choices available to performing musicians. University and Conservatoire training was compared, re-iterating the view that the core of conservatoire training is the 1-1 tuition, where students do not progress if they fail their end of year recital. While Professor David Fallows compares this to University Education, saying students “will have less time to practise and fewer lessons” but “will be in a high quality performing environment, he also suggests that after graduation, performers who wish to go into the profession can do a postgraduate course at a conservatoire. However the article goes on to maintain that the number of options available for performance modular degrees is now more varied than these two polar positions would suggest.

There certainly seems to be an increase in the number of performance based modular degrees both here and in the USA (Radionoff *et al.* 2008), hence the interest in researching assessment of music performance (Hargreaves *et al.* 2002, Ginsborg *et al.* 2007)

In the following section I will look at some of the current practice of assessment in performance based modular degrees in HE Institutions.

## 2. Over view of current practice in other HE Institutions

This overview will focus particularly on first year undergraduate assessment. Unfortunately the response from my internet survey was rather poor so I cannot claim this to be a comprehensive overview. However a few salient points can be made:

- Some universities still maintain the traditional musicological basis for the degree: “if you are a choral scholar - you are not necessarily reading music for your degree and there is no formal assessment of choral scholars. Musicians who are reading music do not actually have to ‘perform’ at any point in their degree - it is an academic institution and performance is not necessarily a requirement (!!)
- There is an option to do a ‘recital paper’ as part of your final 3rd year exams. But only really feasible if your particular college (or Bank-of-mum-and-dad) have paid for your lessons in an instrument throughout your three years.” (email-Singing Teacher)
- While performance assessment in conservatoires is still fundamental to progress it would seem that not all 1-1 tutors are kept informed of the criteria. “...assessments - they keep on changing, and the teaching staff are the last people to be informed. The last information I had was mid-year and end-of-year assessments, all counting towards final grades, though less weighting in the first year.” (email-Singing Teacher)
- Some of the newer colleges of music assess performance in ensemble initially in the first year and only assess solo performances at the end of year. “First years are assessed in ensemble performance at the end of both semesters but only at the end of year in solo performance and the first year assessments do not count towards the overall degree result.” (email- Performance Tutor)

One university that responded to my email request spoke of using reports from the 1-1 tutors, something that is encouraged at Chichester but not mandatory. “All our first year students take a year-long performance module which is assessed in part by

reports given by their instrumental/vocal teachers (one at the end of each semester), and by a 10 minute recital at the end of the year. The first year performance module does count toward the final degree mark, but modules taken in years 2 and 3 are more heavily weighted, so as long as a student passes the module, the specific mark is not of much consequence compared to later modules.” (email-University Tutor)

At Chichester there is a summative assessment at the end of each semester but the first year’s marks do not count towards the final degree.

The rise of Jazz and Pop/Rock performance based courses has led to new perspectives on assessment criteria: an emphasis on both the product, as in creating a live jazz improvisation with audience, as well as the process through informal assessments throughout the year on musicianship, sight reading, and ensemble work.

The music industry emphasizes the **product** and also oversees the ‘package’ but in music education the **process** of music performance is given more emphasis, with the journey towards the final product being ‘training’ of the musician. The examining boards of ABRSM (Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music), Trinity Guildhall, and the LCM (London College of Music and Media), are beginning to change their focus with some of their examinations, in particular the Music Theatre syllabus of LCM, including a viva voce based on questions about rehearsal techniques, exam preparation and background knowledge of repertoire.

### **3. Research questions**

#### **What strategies can best help develop performance skills?**

The aim of doing this research was very practical; I wanted the results to be of benefit to students and teachers in HE Institutions. Although this was a small study and was purely voluntary, I was aware that the students who responded to the invitation to be interviewed would be more likely to feel they have achieved some success and so be more positive about the undergraduate experience. Themes which emerge from the data do however, suggest what might be considered best practice regarding the development of performance skills.

#### **What role has the summative assessment in developing performance skills?**

Assessments and examinations are not purely a tool to grade students. The way assessments are conducted and seen to be managed, can engender positive or negative experiences for a new undergraduate performer. Exploring the role the summative assessment in enhancing performance skills forms a key part of the research.

#### **What are the challenges facing first year undergraduate music students in performance modules?**

All students will face challenges in their first semester at undergraduate level and these have been clearly identified by Burwell (2003). I want to explore what these are particularly for vocal students as well as for the other instrumentalists. By identifying common challenges, responses to initial undergraduate development can be refined.

#### **What are the indications of a 'vocal identity' in student narratives?**

I want to pursue the idea of vocal identity that I explored in my doctoral studies, with an examination of young singers at undergraduate level when the singing voice is beginning to be established and the vocal mechanism is becoming more stable. I hope that indications of vocal identity can be traced within the data and examined in relation to the role of assessment and can provide guidelines for the training of undergraduate singers.

## **4. Research Methods**

### **Internet survey of assessment procedures in HE institutions**

I used the internet to survey the timing and the type of assessment taking place in other performance modular degrees. I found that online syllabuses gave very few details of the timing and kind of assessment offered on performance modules. I decided to focus on a small cross-section of Higher Education so I emailed sixteen institutions including conservatoires, established and new universities and performing arts colleges. I also emailed some of my colleagues who worked at HE level asking them for their perception of assessment procedures for singers. All comments have been treated confidentially.

### **Questionnaires**

In the second week of the semester all the music degree students wishing to have vocal tuition were auditioned on three separate days. I gave each student a questionnaire to be filled in. I deliberately kept the structure of the questionnaire open to allow for any individual response but also gave tick answers for ease of response. I did not make the aims of the research too specific so that the students were free to interpret the questions in their own way. All twenty-five forms were returned and fifteen students subsequently agreed to be interviewed. All students were assured of the anonymity of their responses. Some of the students were studying an instrument as well as voice and were entitled to 4 hours 1-1 teaching on each instrument, others were studying voice as a single study and were entitled to 8 hours 1-1 teaching per semester.

### **Initial interviews**

The fifteen interviews took place in the practice rooms of the music school and took approximately 15 minutes each. The interview began with a general request, “tell me about your singing and what you feel about singing”. The following questions formed the subsequent structure of the interviews though students were free to talk at a tangent if they wished. The questions were deliberately kept very open and were more prompts to get the students talking about their singing and general music education.

- How did your interest in singing/music begin?
- How much family support and involvement took place?
- What are your favourite music genres?
- How would you describe your vocal sound?
- Do you compose your own songs?
- What positive or negative experiences have you had with your music making?
- Are you aware of the assessment that you will have at the end of semester?
- Are you principally a solo singer or do you prefer ensemble work?

### **Diaries**

All fifteen students interviewed were given a singing diary to complete over the first semester. Unfortunately only 5 completed the diary. However the diary data was useful because it indicated self-reflective thoughts and while only a small number were completed in this study, this kind of student involvement may be possible to include as reflexive preparation for performance. Some university courses use this tool as a compulsory part of modular learning (personal email).

### **Final interviews**

When all the interviews and diaries were transcribed they were analysed and each singer was coded with a letter, A to Q. The initial interview was coded with (i), the diary data with (d) and the final interview (ii). The following table gives detail about the singers and the coding and shows which singers completed both interviews and the diary task. Fifteen singers were interviewed initially but only ten students did both interviews, five students completed singing diaries. However two singers who were unable to be interviewed initially were interviewed at the end of the first semester. It could be interpreted that the students who did complete both interviews were singers who were more positive about their first semester experiences. As the research was voluntary I did not pursue those who were unwilling to be interviewed a second time. This was a small sample of students, but the data are still informative, in particular, about the strategies and skills of the more confident singers.



Table showing the coding for the data analysis

Gender	Singer number	Code	Initial interview	Final interview	Diary
F	1	A	I	ii	d
F	2	B	I	-	
M	3	C	I	ii	d
M	4	D	I	ii	d
M	5	E	i	ii	d
M	6	F	i	ii	d
F	7	G	i	-	
F	8	H	i	ii	
F	9	I	i	ii	
M	10	J	i	-	
M	11	K	i	-	
M	12	L	i	ii	
F	13	M	i	ii	
F	14	N	i	-	
F	15	O	i	ii	
F	16	P	-	ii	
F	17	Q	-	ii	

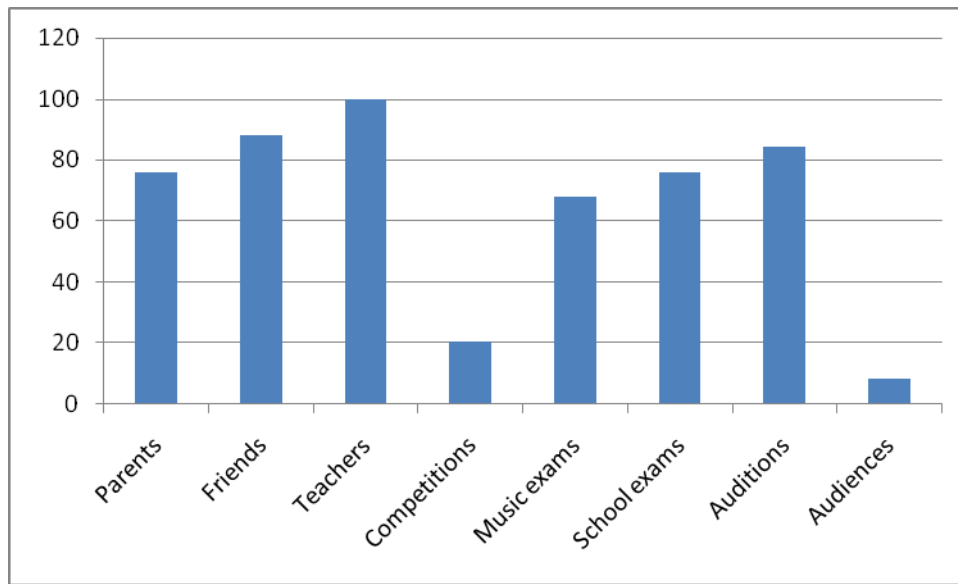
## 5. Questionnaire Results

When asked why they chose the course at Chichester, eleven specifically said they wanted performance opportunities and all said they wanted to develop their musical and vocal skills in order to enter a career in music or singing. One student commented that she chose the course because it was diverse. All the students cited school concerts and amateur concerts as their principal performance experience before coming to Chichester, but fifteen had performed in semi-professional gigs. Informal singing with friends, karaoke and recordings were also cited by at least ten of the students as performance opportunities. One mentioned busking, three mentioned church services and one had sung in a restaurant as background music. The majority said they loved performing while thirteen specifically mentioned getting nervous.

I asked about the kind of assessment and feedback the students had received in the past and the following categories were ticked.

- ✓ Parents – 19
- ✓ Friends – 22
- ✓ Teachers – 25
- ✓ Competitions – 5
- ✓ Music Exams – 17
- ✓ GCSE/AS and A2 exams – 19
- ✓ Auditions – 21
- ✓ Audiences – 2

Table 1 showing source of feedback



I also asked if they had any plans for a career when they left Chichester, these responses varied from teaching, composing, having a band, free-lance musician, masters degree at a conservatoire and 'don't know'. They all said they tried to listen and learn from comments but only seven said they enjoyed getting feedback. Their experience of singing exams varied from 'fun and exciting' to 'not good' but many had not taken specific vocal examinations. Their musical tastes were very diverse, not all the categories were filled in, but it is interesting to note that Music Theatre, Opera, Jazz and Pop/Rock categories appear to be the most popular.

Table 2 showing favourite music genres

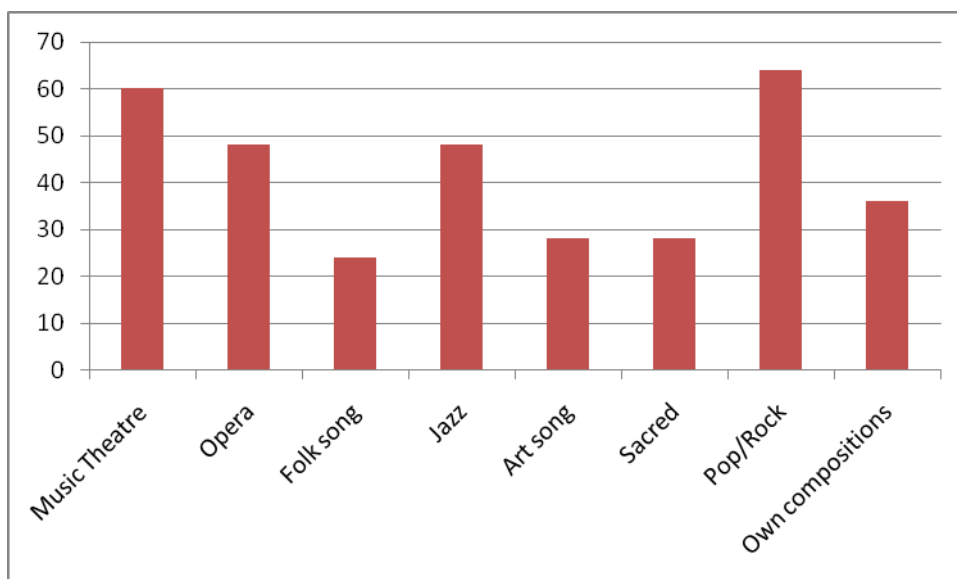
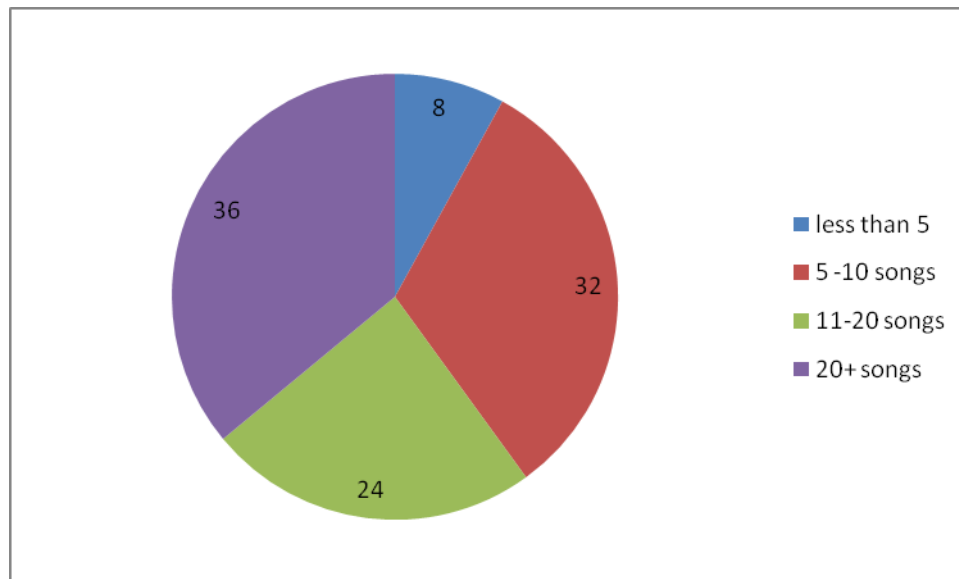


Table 3 showing % of repertoire learnt in the past year



When asked how they chose their repertoire, twenty one mention the internet/CD /TV/ radio and also the majority used teacher suggestions as their main source of learning new repertoire, while only nine appear to use the piano or keyboard to explore new music. Two singers said they had learnt less than 5 songs in the past year. Eight said they had learnt between 5 and 10 songs, six had learnt between 11 and 20, and nine had learnt more than 20 songs in the past year. When asked how much time they spent rehearsing or practising, the responses varied from, 'when and where I can', three said less than an hour a week, while nine said they spent an average of an hour a day. Some spoke of 2 or 3 hours a day, while others sang for less than half an hour a day. The course guide at Chichester suggests 6 hours a week of private study for each instrument studied.

The diversity in the hours of practice poses several questions:

- Does a lack of interest in performing reflect the amount of practice time?
- Or does it reflect a lack of time management skills or a lack of facilities to practice?
- Is the quality of time spent rather than actual hours more significant in developing good performance skills?

I compared the results, looking at repertoire learnt over a year as an indication of how much beneficial practice might be taking place. This was not consistent, with some singers claiming to have learnt more than 20 songs over a year on half an hour a day's work while others claimed the same number on 2-3 hours a day. The question remains as to whether the students were just 'singing' for the practice time or were using the time to develop technique and repertoire. It was not possible to verify any claims but it provoked further questions as to the best way a 1-1 tutor could improve both quality of students' practice and the amount of new repertoire learnt.

## 6. First Interviews

### Themes which emerged from the data

#### Expectations and Aspirations

- Ambitions not matched by skills -Self-esteem/Unrealistic career goals
- Course requirements/expectations
- Practical /Theoretical musicians

#### Vocal identity – vocal prototypes –performer /creator /explorer

- Vocal range: Post-adolescent voice maturation
- Number of practice hours and amount of repertoire learnt over a semester
- Musical tastes – **performing** familiar repertoire or **exploring** the new
- **Creating** own songs – the composer singer

#### Skill level

- Learning skills: reflexive skills
- Aural skill and Vocal perception
- Musical skill

#### Expectations and aspirations

All the students appeared to be keen to learn and were very positive about the first two weeks at the university, mentioning the friendly atmosphere and the welcoming approach of the academic and tutorial staff. They also showed a mature and considered attitude to the semester ahead.

I think this is the term I'm going to sort of, like learn, all the techniques and everything and then next term I can start putting it all together. (Singer Ai)

...lots of people were saying that I sang really nice and stuff, and I always want to hear some criticism from people. That's why I think it's a good idea to come here. (Singer Bi)

Many spoke about their willingness to explore other kinds of music and performance practice.

I mean, I want to be a musical director. But then, although it's mainly theatre based it does kind of lead off onto other things. So you can do classical bits and jazz stuff. I mean, like jazz for example, jazz and classical actually, I enjoy listening to them but I can't really play them particularly well even though I have been classically trained as a pianist. But I'm very willing to go and branch off into different things and have a look. (Singer Ci)

I suppose I'm mostly used to sacred music just because I've been singing it so much. But I don't mind secular music, I want to kind of do as much as I can really, while I'm here. (Singer Hi)

Some were particularly aware of the skills they lacked.

It's interesting because if you can't do anything about it (*laughs*), because I know my limitations. (Singer Di)

...but I haven't been trained properly. I can sing, but I haven't been trained and I've always wanted to. But because I'm more of a woodwind player I've never had the opportunity (Singer Ii)

Yes well my singing teacher is very classical and operatic. So I kind of have to explore that one a bit more. But I don't just want to be here to do one genre. I want to sort of ...I feel a little bit out of my depth here actually at the moment, since I've come here, because I've not come from a very singing background technical wise... (Singer Fi)

There was also evidence that the course was offering something specific that they had made an effort to find.

I sort of tried to research singing on the internet and depending on which site you go to and who you ask you get about fifty million different responses, so, I wanted to go to someone who's actually being paid to do it and has to answer to the university (*laughs*) ... But I had my first lesson this morning so... And he seems to know what he's talking about. (Singer Li)

...so I wanted to go ahead and do a teaching course and so I googled singing teaching degree and the only thing that I could find, after hours of trawling, was here. This is the only degree. And so I was like – I thought it looked really amazing. (Singer Ei)

I think, again, conservatoire is very much performance based. You need to be very good in your field, your instrument. University – I've always been quite academic as well. I picked sixth form instead of college, sort of thing, the A-Levels. And, it was just sort of a natural development really, because it's the A-level, degree. When I came to choosing the actual degree I chose this one because there's a lot of freedom within – (Singer Fi)

The practical nature of the course appealed to most of the students but it highlights the dilemma for some of the students who still had to respond to the more theoretical parts of the course.

It was a lot of information to take in at once. I thought the first week was hectic. Last week was just manic. A lot of information. A lot of information that I should know but wasn't quite sure about. Because I'm more of a practical person than a theoretical person, talking about the theoretical side of composing and everything else, and performing, I find it hard. Only because I've always got away with not actually doing anything except... (Singer Ii)

For some of the students who were already confident with their own performing skills and seemed to have a natural practical musicianship, learning in a more structured environment was challenging. The following student only attended one of her singing lessons and in the summative assessment sang two arias that had been in her repertoire for some time.

I've been performing semi-professionally for kind of - I've been paid for it for five years, so... Mainly kind of weddings, funerals and stuff within my own church but obviously I've kind of developed quite a few contacts here there and everywhere... I've never had like kind of private – I've never paid for private tuition for anything. I've played quite a few things and I've never had lessons in any of them. (Singer Gi)

Some of the students were admitted on the IVT two year diploma with the option to complete the third year for a BA (Mus) and for some their plans were far-reaching.

I'm doing the IVT but I plan to do the third year and hopefully a master's as well. (Singer Mi)

And I hope to get an MA in either Choral Directing or Performance, I haven't quite decided yet. But my hope is to get a really good result in diploma and do my best for that. And after that, sing to the world, teach the world (*laughs*). (Singer Oi)



In the final interviews at the end of the first semester some of the expectations about the course and the students' awareness of their musical abilities and learning skills may be challenged. However in these initial interviews it is apparent that each student has a sense of their own musical 'status' and clear ideas about their aspirations. By looking in particular at 'vocal identity' I aim to clarify the vocal prototypes identified in previous research, namely performer, creator, explorer (Monks, 2007:169).

### Vocal Identity

One finding that emerged from the first interviews was that some of the students were highly reflexive practitioners who performed within their own field of expertise quite successfully. For some of the students who did not want to develop their vocal skills beyond those horizons, the demands of the course could prove challenging. If they were generally unwilling to learn new repertoire or new vocal technical skills, this would not fulfil the course criteria or lead to personal development. However, some of the singers had already shown their commitment to singing by instigating choirs at their previous colleges.

when I started college, there wasn't a choir in my college so I pushed and pushed for a singing group or some sort of ensemble to be put together, and eventually there was so I was sort of like the founding member of the (*laughs*).  
(Singer Ai)

Some of the students were studying voice with another instrument and were still ambivalent about which was their first study.

Definitely not as a violinist as I used to play just four years so it's not my... I can't remember anything. Maybe kind of like a clarinet player. And I want to be a singer. I mean, like now I'm like ...I want to sing for myself. (Singer Bi)

I'm hoping that I'm going to be more passionate about it. I'd definitely say I'm a musician, but I'm more of a performer than a singer I'd say. (Singer Fi)

Some of the students really identified their personality with their singing voice, they had a very strong sense of vocal identity.

I think it probably does depend on the character. I think there's a bit of me in everything, I think. I don't think I can sort of get rid of any of me (*laughs*).

Especially when I'm singing, sort of, because I love it so much, a bit of me comes out \* I'm enjoying it so much. (Singer Ai)

But I just want to sing. See, you're no good\_singing to yourself in the kitchen..., (Singer Di)

Pretty much it's just part of my life. If I'm not practicing singing I'm playing guitar or playing piano or writing some song or thinking about my next song I'm going to write. (Singer Li)

I decided to go for it and sing ... my life. (Singer Ni)

Asking them to describe their vocal timbre revealed how much a sense of aural perception they had acquired, something that would indicate singers who were more experienced at performing solos than choral singers.

My sound, I can't even..., it's so hard. I guess, kind of, I like to use a lot of dynamics and things in my sound. And I've got quite a dark tone to my voice, just naturally. And I quite like that though. (Singer Ei)

I've been told I have a strong voice. Sometimes it can be quite rich, although if I've been out drinking the night before it can be quite tinny. (Singer Ci)

No, I like it, it's a mature sound. I used to think: "oh no, I sound like a man" but now I really really like it and it makes me really excited to think: "oh, that's me making that wonderful sound". Because now I understand about tone, timbre, I don't want to sound like: "la la la", a screechy sort of piccolo soprano, I really love it... and I think it's really something lovely to be able to do. I think it's really attractive in a person to be able to be happy with the way you sound and just embrace it and work with it. (Singer Oi)

In Dance Education at Chichester video recordings are used to help the performers acquire kinaesthetic feedback, helping the student through visualisation techniques. The increase in acoustic analysis technology indicates that singers can be helped through 'auralisation' through the use of high quality recording feedback, Video recording is used at Chichester at present, with MA performing musicians.

Quite a few students spoke about developing their vocal range in terms of notes. Most of the students were 19 and therefore only just emerging from the period of vocal change associated with puberty and vocal range would be extending at this time.

My top note is a top E flat. Well, could be higher but that's what I know that when I'm, you know, kind of working up and warming myself up to the Allegri, I always make sure I can get the top Eb so that the C is comfortable. So as far as I know that's my limit at the moment. (Singer Gi)

One of the young singers had experienced quite a few different teachers and had had unfortunate negative feedback at a previous college but by his own efforts he had researched different vocal styles and come to a mature understanding about the nature of good singing.

I think you've just got to kind of know your voice and be safe with it. Because, you know, I guess it's like anything in life, falling down is going to scrape your knee. And it's going to heal in a couple of days or it's going to get better quickly. But if you keep throwing yourself down the stairs over and over then you're going to end up with broken legs, and I guess it's the same with the voice. (Singer Ei)

Some had very positive feedback from family and friends.

No, they've all been kind of – they all say to me: “I've never heard you sing”, which I don't believe because I was around and just bashed into a little random song, I've been doing it all day actually (*laughs*). It's like: “we've never heard you sing”, “well of course you have. I do it all the time”. (Singer Hi)

I used to work at a ...club at home and a lot of people would come up to me and say: “oh I heard you singing, you've got such a beautiful voice” and I was just thinking: “where have you heard me sing? I don't even know you” and they'd come to a big band concert and just seen me and recognised me and yeah, it's really nice when people sort of compliment you, it gives you so much more confidence. (Singer Ki)

My mum's side's fairly musical but not as musical as me (*laughs*). Most of my granddad's side have been doing music somehow, teaching or in the army, in a band or something like that...Most times when I sing people don't realise that I can sing. I sang at my Mum's wedding, and the family didn't realise I could sing. (Singer Mi)

### Skill level

There was evidence of very different levels of ability across the sample.

I'm a complete novice. (Singer Ii)

I've been doing a lot of baroque opera and oratorio at the moment mostly, as solo repertoire. (Singer Ji)

These aspects of skills, 'musical, vocal and learning', were difficult to judge from the students' own reflections as the understanding of their capabilities may not match with the external expectations.

I was particularly interested in whether the singers were capable of learning new material independently of recordings. As the facility of CD recordings and downloads has been a relatively recent phenomenon, I was interested to learn whether this had replaced learning by keyboard skills and most of the students appeared to use this rather than learning repertoire by reading music. This could prove to be a drawback if the repertoire to be studied was not easily available on recording. Nearly all the students professed to be able to learn new material independently but the variance in the amount of repertoire learnt over the past year could indicate the level of interest in exploring new songs. I was surprised that some could not remember what they had sung for A level recitals only months previously.

## 7. Diaries and Final Interviews

Themes which emerged from the diaries and final interviews were:

- Using known repertoire to develop technique as a valid teaching and learning strategy
- Exploring vocal range and timbre and repertoire linked to vocal maturation
- Awareness of expectations from the course – formative feedback

These seemed to be reliant on the level of the following skills:

- Time Management
- Musical Literacy

### Using known repertoire

It was interesting to note that students used known repertoire in order to acquire technique more quickly and were also using familiar material in the summative assessment to give a good impression. After only 4 hours or a maximum of 8 hours 1-1 tuition, this is understandable.

Yeah it was mostly songs that I knew before because I find it so much easier to sort of – if I know a song then I'll know how it goes. So then I can always imitate someone else singing it. (Singer A ii)

I did ... It's very comfortable in my range and there's higher notes which sound much more powerful than they actually are, which gives a better impression of myself, I think. (Singer C ii)

I've done about five million times before, but I thought then I'd have something that I was really confident with and then I could learn something new for the first performance. (Singer E ii)

But for some it seemed the choice of music was more to do with personal satisfaction rather than presenting a challenge and this applied to instrumentalists as well as singers.

Yeah I did that for my Grade Eight flute a couple of years ago and I like that piece. (Singer I ii)

### Exploring range and repertoire

Many of the students mentioned increasing their vocal range, over the first semester, and this aspect of vocal maturation also appeared in the first interviews. As most of them were in their late teens and early twenties this would be a normal result of the developing voice.

I do think it has developed, yeah. It's definitely stronger because when I came here I thought I had a bit of a low voice and sort of through my lessons, sort of discovered that it's not so much low, I just haven't explored the higher range of my voice yet, so yeah. (Singer A ii)

I looked carefully at the middle bits of the song and the end on my own. I feel the piece is really coming on, just need to add more characterisation! (Singer C d)

And then after kind of re-reading it again I started sort of using stuff that I hadn't done on that before and I ended up singing, you know, right up to A# and I was like: "woah! That's never happened before", which was quite good. And I sang all the way down to D as well. That was crazy. I felt quite good when I did that. It was such a knock when I had bronchitis as well. (Singer E ii)

This singer had really felt he was making great progress, only to be struck down with illness, something that I explore in more detail later.

I think I feel like I've finally started to think about using my own support again after – I just spent so long trying to get my confidence back after I didn't have a very good year last year, where I studied before. And so I feel like in the last sort of week or so I've been thinking quite a lot about it and just kind of trying to work out what I'm doing a lot more and really getting to grips with it on my own. (Singer E ii)

The performance tutor in the following quote, has clearly identified a positive learning experience with his student, but has also set up challenges. The relationship with the performance tutor is fundamental to progress.

I feel like more confident singing, because, like, even higher as well. Because where we worked on the song and he pushed me, like and we did exercises to make me not think about going up higher, so then I just did it, sort of thing, and now with the song I'm like really comfortable with it and -(Singer Q ii)

I'm always keen to learn new songs. We've learnt a lot of jazz songs, at least ten to fifteen jazz songs. But not maybe off-by-heart at the moment because jazz is new to me so...But we've got the music and with, like, singing... But he wants to start, like, making me sing songs I don't know as well, to like read more and sort of...(Singer Q ii)

Some of the students were also using time outside the 1-1 lessons to learn new repertoire.

In my actual lessons, probably three songs. But then outside that, at the beginning of the semester when we had to do things like performance skills, I've learnt about three or four on my own as well. (Singer F ii)

### Awareness of expectations

Most of the students were aware of the learning curve they were embarking on, and many recorded their frustrations as well as their successes. These diary comments are more reflective than some of the interview responses, and it shows the value of such data.

I had my first singing lesson today and I had a mixture of feelings. I always feel invigorated after a lesson as I have learnt something however today I also felt like a beginner as I have sooo much to learn. (Singer A d)

I am now better except my voice hasn't really recovered yet. It is making it slightly more harder to sing. I feel like I have gone straight back to where I started from. (Singer A d)

Had my performance today – It went much better than expected, even though my mouth went really dry before I began to sing! I got through it though, with (I think) a quite decent sound quality and general performance was good. (Singer C d)

Posture, breathing plus practice techniques – a lot to learn.  
Rehearsal of ...went badly. Felt I was losing control of my voice. If I can master this song I will have achieved something. (Singer D d)

Some spoke of their desire to have more performance opportunities, but I am aware that in the past attendance at voluntary workshops and master-classes has been poor at Chichester, due to timetabling commitments.

...those workshops, they're good for testing things out but you only get the one – sometimes, you know, I only had one proper opportunity. Some people had two but that might have been because they were doing two instruments, I don't know. So it might be nice if there were more opportunities during the semester. Because I think, like composition we had two formative assessments, plus the one we're doing now. And I think that's the sort of thing

you do need. But then you have got a vocal or an instrumental coach haven't you, so you could be doing that with them. (Singer D ii)

Assessment is ... goal to work for, also, the first semester, it's very – you're still learning. You're still learning how university works and everything else and with an assessment at the end of it, it just ended that section. It just says: "yeah. That semester's gone. I've managed to do it. I know that I'm right here". (Singer I ii)

### Time management

As the term progressed some of the students found their time management skills lacking, whereas others were more capable of seeing the end goals and planning for them.

I'm now singing one of my songs really well, but I'm finding harder to find the time to practice due to my work load. (Singer A d)

I just can't get into the workload (Singer D ii)

Yeah it's been ok actually, I started my work when I was sort of meant to, not early but a couple of weeks ago so I haven't been rushing at the end, sort of now, so... (Singer Q ii)

I think I probably ended up doing more practise than I did preparation work for my essays. (Singer H ii)

Not realising how much work there was at the end. And like maybe some when at the beginning where, I suppose because I didn't really know many people and it was really completely different from what I was used to in terms of learning styles and it was just something I had to get used to, and once I had then it was great but it the beginning it was a bit of a struggle. (Singer P ii)

### Musical literacy

One of the biggest problems for singers was the lack of accompanying skills, the CD backing tracks that some used were not sufficient preparation for learning new repertoire. There were also singers who had problems with basic music literacy.

I've had plenty of lessons for years and he didn't tell me anything that I haven't been told before. (Singer D ii)

I can't accompany myself. And I feel as well that when I'm playing an instrument I end up using that as a kind of crutch to my voice. Because if I can



see myself playing the notes then I know what to do, but then the minute I take it away it's completely different. (Singer E ii)

I guess, a reason why I've not really asked any of the other pianists or anything if they can play it for me because, I think, when you're first learning a song it's such a private thing that you need to do. Because you end up sounding awful for the first few times you do it and you don't want people to hear that. (Singer E ii)

Some of the singers were going into their summative assessment with very little idea of the accompaniment.

## 8. Reflexive practitioners

The first research question was:

### **What strategies can best help develop performance skills?**

Three factors emerged which appeared to be interactive: those that made use of the performance opportunities also seemed to be the better skilled at time management and music literacy.

1. Positive performance opportunities and feedback e.g. chamber choir, opera auditions, jazz night gigs etc.
2. Music literacy skills: being able to use an accompanist rather than relying on CD backing tracks for rehearsal
3. Time management

### Feedback

There were several different kinds of feedback reported, some were peer initiated, some were audition success for the various choirs, and the opera production auditions also gave some of the singers a real boost.

I have started singing at Karaoke which I haven't done before. I have performed before but not sung in such a social situation. I really enjoyed this because it was invigorating, and it gave me the chance for other people to criticise me, but I received a lot of compliments. (Singer A d)

It's nice because one of my friends came up to me a couple of weeks ago when I was practising for my thing...and he said: "was that your voice? That was amazing" ...So that was definitely a good thing. (Singer C ii)

I think it's come on leaps and bounds. The easiest way to think about it is, I got a part in the opera, a main part... I've never done sort of opera before and I've just started classical this semester so... (Singer F ii)

There were opportunities for performance in an informal setting but on some occasions the attendance was poor and for others it was not a positive experience. Many of the singers appeared to welcome more performance occasions.

I only had one. There was a group of us who only had one and everyone else had two, that was a bit ...I don't know, I didn't really find it all that helpful to be honest, I mean, obviously any performance you get is a good experience but I didn't really get much feedback from it - (Singer P ii)

Master-classes would be really helpful. Speaking just from a vocalist's point of view, I find, like in our 'Technique for the Young Performer' classes and stuff, everything is really geared towards instrumental stuff and all the examples are on cello because the teacher's a cellist. So, you know, obviously that's what's going to come into her head but sometimes I'm finding it hard to relate to singing. But, yeah, I think just more performance opportunities would be helpful. (Singer E ii)

### Music Literacy

It was clear that for some of the singers a lack of basic keyboard skills and music literacy was hampering their development vocally, both in learning new repertoire and in choral singing.

when I was at ...we had to learn about six songs a week. And to now come and just be learning one, it's just a bit strange and I feel like I can't learn it properly because I don't have the backing track to work with. I think I would have learnt it a lot more quickly if I'd had – (Singer E ii)

with me, with multi-part scoring. Because I can follow a melody...but when you start doing harmony lines... (Singer D ii)

Apparently there was made available for students an accompanist on Wednesday mornings but only one student mentioned this and he had only just discovered this.

### Time management

It seems that managing their time and dividing it between the academic modules and practical modules, proved a challenge for some. A natural inclination to work on those aspects of the course that were enjoyable may be obvious. It also suggest that once removed from the strict regimes of school and possible home life structures, students find it difficult to balance the practical and the theoretical aspects of study.

I think it can sometimes become hard because you become focussed on the essays because it's an essay and it's scary. And so people tend to sort of forget about the performance because it's performance and they do it all the time, and just do the essays and then just not practise at all, which isn't brilliant. (Singer P ii)

However some students did manage to work effectively and were also aware of achieving new levels of learning skills:

The first formative that I did. Handing in everything, just before the half term, and just handing everything in and knowing that I did it. That I managed to do it, that I did that composition, that I did everything. I suppose it would be: “I’m at uni and I did this”. (Singer I ii)

**Keeping a performance diary might encourage regular self-appraisal and this might be something for musicians and performance tutors to consider, particularly in the first semester.**

## 9. Vocal identity

### What are the indications of a ‘vocal identity’ in student narratives?

I believe understanding the psychology of singing to be fundamental to improving the development of singers, particularly in the late teens and early twenties, just before the voice matures and settles at around 25 years of age. The psychological, musical and technical habits that develop at undergraduate level are vital to the performance satisfaction of both the singer and potential audience. It is a fine balance between confidence in ability and learning from positive and negative feedback in beneficial ways. A lack of confidence or an unreal belief in true vocal skill can mean difficulties in the relationship with a 1-1 tutor, resulting in a lack of progress or little desire to learn.

This is where the development of aural perception is of great importance, the mismatch between internal and external auditory perception in singers is now well documented (Monks, 2007). The vocal and instrumental tutors have a vital role to play in developing these aural discrimination techniques with their students accurate self-monitoring when practising is true reflexive behaviour.

It also seems that the prototypes identified in previous research (Monks, 2007) of performer, creator and explorer are useful in identifying and developing undergraduate performers. Some of the singers were beginning to emerge with these attributes. Confidence is a big factor as well as enjoying singing, in developing vocal identity:

Probably more of a solo singer as I was more of a choral person before, I think. Because I was kind of too afraid and like: “I want to be in a crowd”. And I’ve almost come out and went – come out of my shell and come into my own. And I’ve started to really enjoy singing much more than I did before. (Singer C ii)

I probably prefer singing with the band behind me, that’s more... But I do feel more confident singing. Because at my college I was at, I was a bit – I only got to sing once, there was loads of singers and I didn’t really get to sing a lot so I thought when I come here I’d like to sing a bit more than I have, I feel I have. (Singer Q ii)

I used to describe myself as more of a choral singer but I think this term I've grown in terms of a solo performer. But I still really enjoy singing in ensembles. (Singer P ii)

This extract illustrates a young singer learning to explore new techniques and new repertoire. His diary comments indicate a pragmatic approach.

I don't normally struggle with sort of learning new songs but it's the working on them and getting them alright, I'm ok with sort of getting the melody and the words pretty quickly because I've done a lot of acting as well, words seem to come pretty quickly. Because I'm doing classical I've got away with having pretty poor tone to a certain - My vowel production, for example, we've been working on that. And also one of my other lectures I've been doing 'Technique for the Young Performer' and we had to plan a lesson for a young performer and then write an essay on a technique, and I've actually taken that as my technique, sort of vowel production, and done a lesson plan on that so I get sort of both perspectives on that, so that should help. It's one of those things I'm having to re-learn, it was like going back to the beginning sort of, when I started here. But I hadn't had that many singing lessons to start with anyway, so it was nice – (Singer F ii)

I had one or two more singing lessons since the last entry. I decided to 'give in' as it were, and I am now studying classical repertoire in my lessons. I decided this is best as it is where my teacher's expertise lies, and it allows us to also study the basics which I lack due to self-tuition, such as breathing and tone. (Singer F d)

I am actually inspired to practise. This doesn't usually happen! (Singer F d)

The development of a 'creative and exploratory' vocal identity in Singer F can easily be seen, but not all the singers in the sample were singing as their first study. With only 4 hours 1-1 tuition a semester, half an hour each fortnight, many aspects of vocal production would not be covered in the first year.

**There is a case for extra group sessions on basic vocal health, anatomy, post-pubertal maturity and repertoire learning skills which could be offered for such students. A fast-track learning tool is the use of recording and acoustic analysis feedback and this might be another helpful addition to vocal studies.**

One of the singers was clearly aware of the potential to explore:

I like singing, so I thought it would be beneficial for me to learn how to sing instead of just pretending. (Singer I ii)

It would appear that many students at this level are keen to develop and understand the difference between singing for pleasure and the technical possibilities available with further study.

## 10. Physical health and vocal maturity: why singers are a special case

The third research question asked:

### **What are the challenges facing 1<sup>st</sup> year undergraduate performers?**

Apart from the obvious and well documented changes to lifestyle and sense of purpose having left home (Burwell, 2003) the following themes emerged as critical to positive development plus the music literacy and time management skills previously highlighted:

- Relationship with performance tutor 1-1 teacher
- Vocal ability, vocal health and maturity

Forty per cent of the students at Chichester studying vocal and instrumental development in their first year (in 2009) were singers, though some were also studying instruments and choosing to present both studies for their performance. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this is representative of other university performance module based degrees, perhaps an indication of the rise of singing talent shows such as *X-factor* and *Pop Idol*. Singers are not vocally mature at 18 years, hence the need for research of this group of performing musicians and one argument for treating singers as a special case.

### Relationship with 1-1 tutor

The following quotes show a mixture of relationships with the 1-1 tutor and the students' reaction, some seem to prefer a more 'comfortable' situation while others are stimulated by challenges and different approaches to teaching singing.

Relationship with singing teacher-It's never – it's not comfortable. (Singer D ii)

Yeah, I think it was because I was taught in a very sort of conservative manner and because there's so many like insane in the nicest way tutors here, it was just something – I was completely out of my depth. You know, it was totally different, it was like: "should we really be doing this?", but it turned out to be actually really helpful, in the end. (Singer P ii)

"oh, you know, there's no way you can sing above an F" and I was like: "I've been singing up to G in loads of songs!". And so I was just a bit, kind of, a little bit disheartened by that (Singer E ii)



Again the diary comments reveal a shifting perspective on behalf of the student:

First singing lesson.

Done various exercises on vowel sounds. "I don't like the sound you are making".  
Initial reaction - 'Oh no, this is bad' Reasonably bad mood for rest of day. Didn't go to karaoke that evening. (Singer F d)

During week preceding this lesson I took last lesson's comments and tried to imitate the sound instructor was making. This seemed to work.

Better comment this week:

"You have a nice tenor voice and we don't want to lose that."

Teacher seems more human this week. (Singer F d)

This student seems to have had a dramatic learning curve from his first lesson to the second and appears to have adjusted quickly to the performance tutor's approach.

#### Vocal ability, vocal health and maturity

Although as a singer myself, I am acutely aware of the inconveniences of poor health, coughs and colds, I was still surprised at how much singing time in the first semester the students had lost. "Freshers' flu" is a common enough phenomenon but it really affected the singers' ability to practice and develop their voice in the first semester. It also affected their sense of vocal identity in powerful ways and many commented on how it had disturbed them psychologically.

Bronchitis! How horrible. I have antibiotics from the doc so I'm feeling a bit better. It's horrible not being able to sing. (Singer E d)

No marked amount of practice this week due to a cold! (Singer C d)

Being ill. Very much so around Christmas and winter time I'm very susceptible at getting ill, which is not good. Also I've had problems at home over the last couple of weeks with personal things and everything else, so it didn't help. Also, the housing situation because I still haven't found a house, so I'm getting down about that.. (Singer I ii)

Along with other student problems like housing and money, the common cold and not being able to sing just increases the stress:

Well I got a cold again and problems with money and it's just a bit stressful writing essay after essay after essay. (Singer M ii)

Singers were well aware of the need to be at their best for assessment- this singer was a competent instrumentalist and so could substitute another of her pieces:

That went very well, considering the bassoon piece I'd hadn't chosen to do until about three days before because I got a cold again. I was going to sing and do oboe but I did bassoon and oboe instead. Because of the cold I thought: "I'm not going to reach top C's without..."(Singer M ii)

When asked how they felt the voice had developed over the semester, several commented that little progress had been made:

Not much at all because I haven't been able to do much with it recently (Singer M ii)

No. Only because a couple of weeks ago I had the flu and my throat still hasn't got back to how it was so I thought it best be wise to leave it until I'm more confident with my voice. (Singer I ii)

**This seems to suggest that singers do need specific help in dealing with basic vocal health in order to use their practice time effectively even when their voice is not at full capability.**

## 11. The role of summative assessment

The main research question asked:

### **What role has summative assessment in developing performance skills?**

It would appear from the data that it gives a focus for semester work but only of developmental value if students perform songs with an increased technical or expressive ability on old repertoire or use new repertoire. Summative assessment should have a role in supporting instrumental and vocal development and different models are available as can be seen by the brief survey of other HE Institutions.

At the University of Chichester summative assessment takes place at the end of each 16 week semester. In the first year of undergraduate studies it suggests a programme of 5-7 minutes long. The performance module handbook suggests 'students assess their current repertoire and begin an exploration of new work' and develop basic 'performance and communication skills on which technical and expressive development will depend'. Some students had made themselves very familiar with the course criteria others did not.

I think it's been determination with the practise and the singing really. I think it's going to become a lot better next semester now I've got something sort of to work for. The assessment this term didn't sort of seem to be very well explained I don't think. I only found out sort of quite late that we had to have two pieces for example, I was working on one. (Singer F ii)

Encouraging musician to question why they are performing, who they are performing to and what the current expectations if performance practice are within their chosen genres, is another approach being offered at Birmingham Conservatoire. Dr. Peter Johnson spoke about this at a recent conference of the Association of Teachers of Singing (Yarnall, 2008). His notion of the 'circles of interpretation' was based on Anthony Rooley's book *Performance: Revealing the Orpheus within* (1990). The ideas original came from Castiglione's writing in *The Book of the Courtier* (1528) in which three elements of performance are identified, namely:

*Decoro*: being conventional, doing what's expected

*Sprezzatura*: a sense of fun, wit, repartee, spicy, unconventional

*Grazia*: elegance, beauty, magical

Johnson expands these ideas into four categories of performance that are often encountered in student recitals,

- A. Dull or 'safe'
- B. Unconventional but not effective
- C. Conventional but beautiful
- D. Highly unorthodox but effective

Giving students alternative ways of approaching performance assessment is another tool for the performance tutor to consider: teaching singers and instrumentalists specific performance strategies develops creative reflexive behaviour. This also engages the student in decisions involved in the *process* of performance.

## 12. Points of interest for the University of Chichester

Although the remit of my study was not to examine the general aspects of undergraduate adjustment to university life, in my initial interviews and the questionnaire I wanted the students to feel they could be honest in their comments and so I asked them general questions about their first semester experiences. The students were very positive about their induction week at Chichester and some of their comments show clearly the welcome and friendly atmosphere within the music department at Chichester.

Thoroughly enjoyed it. I've learnt a lot in the first semester, a hell of a lot.  
(Singer I ii)

One student was very clear about students taking the initiative in learning:

I do spend the majority of time I should be working, singing... I think the criteria was made extremely clear and it's a personal bug-bear of mine actually when people say: "well you didn't tell us blah blah blah" and it's written in the handbook and they have told us several times. So I think, as a person that pays attention, a lot that it is very clear if you just take the initiative to look. Because that's what it's about at this level of education isn't it? It's about finding things out, it's not about spoon feeding and having people usher you around to things, you know, if you miss your slot it's your own fault. So, I mean, you've paid three grand to come here and have this education so try and get everything out of it that you can. (Singer O ii)

I find the university has been really really good and really helpful. What I would like is more performance related stuff. (Singer E ii)

One student mentioned the change of emphasis on the course that she had experienced:

just about the course, this is just myself, probably I was more – I thought it would be I bit more rocky, like less classical and jazz and a bit more my own thing but it wasn't. But I can do that outside, I can get in a rock band and start doing something outside. Jazz and classical is like not my thing but if I learn that then I've got an open mind for repertoire. (Singer Q ii)

For some the numbers in the year group, compared to the smaller numbers studying at school was a bit daunting:

it's hard because I didn't realise there would be so many in the year, because there's quite a lot of us, but performing, I did get really nervous actually, performing, and I messed up both my pieces, but we only got to play twice, like in the whole semester, and it would have been nicer maybe to play more, perform -(Singer Q ii)

Some felt they had been challenged by the course:

Yes. I really do think I've challenged myself without over stressing myself. (Singer O ii)

And others commented on the different perspectives on offer:

Well it's been definitely interesting because I've only really had one singing teacher in the past, and so it's been interesting to get different perspectives on things and learn in different ways. (Singer P ii)

With regard to the findings from best practice at other HE Institutions the following suggestions might be considered when designing future assessments for performance modules.

1. Ask performance tutors to provide a brief statement of progress on their students
2. Use a diary/practice notebook as part of the assessment of students reflexive learning to encourage creativity and a sense of progress
3. Use time at the end of the practical assessment to conduct a short informal viva with the student to gauge musical and instrumental development over the semester
4. Use ensemble participation and informal music making as part of the overall grade for performance modules

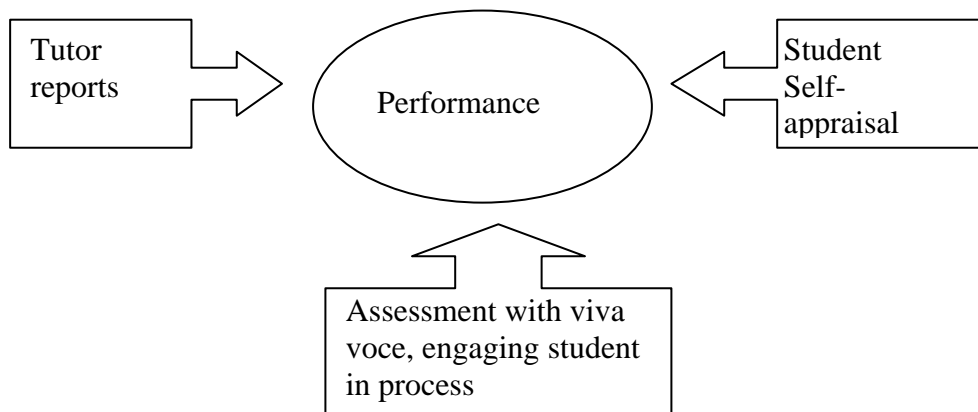
### 13. Conclusion

There would appear to be no uniform model of assessment for performance modular degrees across HE Institutions: there are a diverse range of options and universities seem to tailor assessment procedures to course requirements and/or student needs.

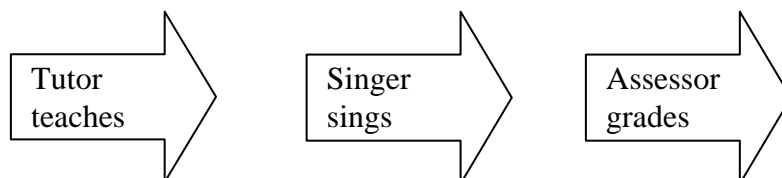
However the different emphasis of assessment can provoke dialogue as to best practice in this area, while the priorities used can help to refine performance assessment in all areas. Various criteria for assessment can be seen across the HE Institutions;

- Formal/informal
- Solo/ensemble
- Product/process

The move towards more flexible models of summative assessment with perspectives taken from all participants in the performance learning environment seems to be more widely practised now.



Assessment can be most productive when the student and the performance tutor and the examiners all contribute to the process, rather than a formal linear model that was used in the past.



Future research could compare different models, but the difficulty remains as to quantifying the differences. This has been a qualitative study, looking at the 'unquantifiable' aspects of vocal performance. These data offer an insight into undergraduate singer experience which can lead all of us to further questions about the nature of performance and assessment for all musicians.

In summary:

- Being a reflexive practitioner does not necessarily lead to a more explorative and creative approach to performance
- Focussing on the process as well as the product of performance may encourage development of vocal and instrumental skills and a different learning approach
- Using known repertoire can be a valid tool for technical development if it encourages skills of interpretation and vocal flexibility previously unknown
- Developing a music literacy strategy is needed to improve the learning of new repertoire
- Vocal health, vocal stamina and basic vocal anatomy could help singers learn to cope with illness as well as guiding positive performance practice time
- The wealth of opportunities made available for students to perform both as soloist and in ensemble could be encouraged by using informal music activities as credits towards performance assessment
- Keeping a performance diary to help self-monitoring of progress could focus practice skills for first year students and could also aid the assessment process
- Use of recording and acoustic analysis could highlight learning goals, aid vocal perception and 'auralisation' as well encouraging realistic vocal identity



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