Inspiration and Limitations

The Intersection of Academia and Creativity in Information-Seeking Behaviours of Music Performance Students

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Abstract

Music performance relies greatly on creativity and inspiration, but the ways in which that creativity exists within the academic world have not been seriously studied in the literature on information-seeking behaviours. In my research, I explore how the coalescence of academia with the creativity that music inspires may shape how music students engage with information. Using Sonnenwald et al.'s (2001) Information Horizon Interview technique, I look at the information behaviours of undergraduate music students in preparing for their final graduating recital.

I find that social and digital resources make up a large part of the information students access, though students are selective in how they use these towards their performance. The motivation to maintain an individual style dictates much of the students' behaviours, while limitations set by the academic environment tempers some of this creativity. Hektor's (2003) Information Activities model is applied to analyze the act of performance, creating a new product from the information the students have acquired to showcase their artistic skill, as a form of dressing information. While the current study does not consider the role of emotions in the information-seeking process, future research can look to the effects of performance anxiety on recital preparation.

INTRODUCTION

Music performance relies greatly on creativity and inspiration, so it is fitting that I arrived at the topic for this study through my own encounter with inspiration. An opportunity for a free tour of the local concert hall, and a group of music students playing for passers-by on the street, incited my curiosity into the information behaviours of these students. Students have been a heavily-studied subject of many information-seeking behaviour studies, but with my research I wanted to explore how the coalescence of the academic world and the creativity that music inspires may shape how music students engage with information.

Using Sonnenwald et al.'s (2001) Information Horizon Interview technique, I did an exploratory study of undergraduate music students, looking at the information behaviours involved in preparing for their final graduating recital. I was particularly drawn to how students may interact with resources beyond the analog world, and so focused on social and digital resources as my sensitizing concepts. Beyond the scope of this study is an in-depth look at how emotional responses and embodiment may play into information behaviours, as I expect that musicians in academic settings will rely more on tangible resources.

As my paper will discuss, my findings show that digital and social resources do show up prominently in the students' responses, and I also use Hektor's (2003) Information Activities model in analyzing the students' use of creativity in their performance, setting up this creation of a recital as a dressing of information suited to the student's individual style.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have looked at the information-seeking behaviours around music, though research has tended to bypass the intersection of creativity and academia. Most research has approached the topic from an academic perspective, focused particularly on the use of libraries by students in the course of their studies (Dougan, 2012; Myers & Ishimura, 2016; Zach, 2010). While these have undertaken to understand music students' behaviours in seeking out information, attention is devoted to the resources that are available through the library catalogue without looking beyond the library space. Myers' and Ishimura's (2016) study, which looks at the information literacy of undergraduate students in using their institution's library resources, allows for suggestions as to how to model the library to better suit students' needs but still misses the greater picture of their information experience. Dougan's (2012) study similarly focuses on students' use of the library, though her interviews with students point towards a diverse set of resources at their disposal. Her attention in examining students as opposed to other musicians is still to look at the resources that are accessible to them within their academic setting but her

findings likewise show that more is at work. Dougan (2012) does offer suggestions for further research on specific populations, such as student performers, and the current study builds from this platform.

Similar research has looked more to performance and how creativity plays into the information-seeking process, allowing for broader insights into the field by bringing the focus beyond the student perspective (Kostagiolas et al., 2013; Lavranos et al., 2015). While they have stepped back from the library-centric view and identified a vast array of information resources used by musicians – both conventional, digital, and interpersonal in nature – these studies have been limited in their application. Lavranos et al. (2015) present a model for future research on creativity, albeit drawing on previous rather than original research, while Kostagiolas et al. (2013) look at performance from the perspective of amateur musicians. By bringing the two domains of academia and creativity in performance together, the present study will explore how insights on these two distinct categories raised from previous studies interact with each other, while also utilizing a research method that has not yet been introduced within this topic.

RESEARCH METHODS

Sonnenwald et al.'s (2001) Information Horizon Interview (IHI) methodology served as a framework for this study, pairing a semi-structured interview with a diagrammatic elicitation of the subject's "information horizon" (p. 2). These horizons are visual representations of the informational resources individuals draw on when seeking information. For the interview portion, I prepared an interview guide (see Appendix 1) that focuses on the students' final recital, which was adapted as suited the participant's answers. The process was approached as an exploratory study so no hypotheses were made, though I focused on particular areas of the students' information behaviours as mentioned above.

I interviewed three students, two male and one female, currently enrolled in graduate programs at a Canadian university. They range in age from 22 to 24 years, two in their second year of Master's studies and one in their first. All have an undergraduate degree in music, though each attained this from a different university, across Canada and the Eastern United States. Selection was achieved through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, as I attained participants by putting out calls for music students as well as through an acquaintance with connections in the department.

Ethical considerations were stressed from the beginning of the project. All participants were read an ethical statement before the interview process began, advising them of the voluntariness of their involvement in the study and the ability to withdraw at any time. Recordings were made of the interviews, which were destroyed after being transcribed, and all names and identifying information in the transcripts were removed. Pseudonyms have been used throughout the paper to protect the subjects' anonymity.

FINDINGS

In analyzing my data, I wanted to continue an exploratory approach and so chose to adopt an inductive approach, pulling out common themes from the interviews. While I focused on any unexpected patterns that arose, I used this in combination with a deductive approach in looking for evidence of digital and social informational resources.

Types of Resources

Digital and social resources were commonly identified by the students. As each student was assigned a teacher for private lessons, two named their teacher as their first point of contact as they were an easily accessible resource. While not all students were comfortable going to their teacher to address difficulties in their preparation, Jason describing past experience of a lack of sympathy, all selected music with their teacher's guidance. Other resources used in selection and practice were predominantly digital, especially those that the students indicated as their preferred resource. Both Jason and Nicole named YouTube as their favourite and typically first stop in looking for recordings, while Adrian uses Spotify, though he explained he prefers to create a personally-curated library of music on his computer. They also all made use of several websites for locating scores, and two students regularly used the library in their faculty, both for finding scores and books on the background of a particular piece or composer, using this for context and inspiration in their playing.
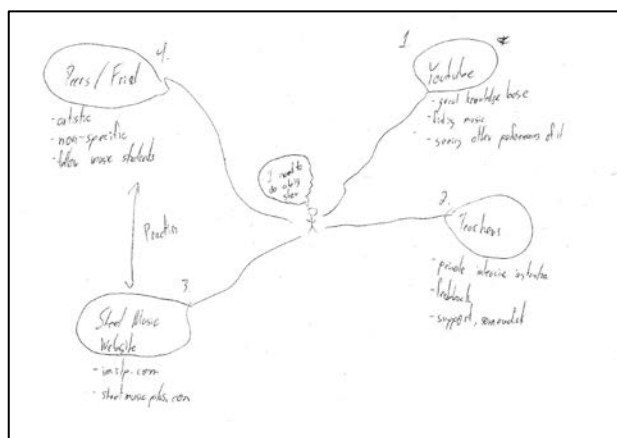

Figure 1. Jason's information horizon map

Friends and musical colleagues were identified by each student, though two saw them as a final step in the process rather than used at an earlier stage. As Figure 1 shows,

Jason drew an arrow to represent practice between selection and peers/friends, describing going to these friends for feedback after practicing and then returning to practice to apply their advice, continuing this back and forth exchange throughout. Though two students cited fellow peers as problematic resources due to the competitiveness of the program, they still largely relied on them in their informational seeking.

Passion for Music
Surprisingly, each student started in music rather unwillingly because of their parents, one describing it as taking on her mother's burden of not being able to go into music herself, but the current passion they have for their craft clearly came through in the interviews.While this passion is not directly connected to their informational behaviours, it relates to their desire to remain individualistic in their playing which bears on how they interact with resources.

As Nicole explained, "as to how you play the piece and interpret it, that's when everything comes together and you have to decide for your own – who you are as an artist…that's something you can't find in books". In her horizon map in Figure 2, she initially listed her teacher first but revised it and added herself above, explaining that she makes the decisions as to what to share with her audience. Adrian's map reflected the same idea though with a more creative interpretation, as shown in Figure 3. He set up his process as a journey with the recital as the destination. Most of interest here was that he drew rollerblades on himself, symbolizing his musical ability, and he explained that without this ability he wouldn't be able to reach any of the next steps, or bus stops, along the way.

They also each commented on the subjective nature of their resources, being careful as to how much they relied on outside information. The students explained that friends and teachers each have their own individual style, and with the recordings they access they refrain from simply copying how the musician performs and instead use it as inspiration. For each student, crafting their own unique style is of the greatest importance and so the ways in which they access information is dictated by this.

Academic Limitations
Two of the students, Jason and Nicole, also commented on how the academic nature of their recitals restrained some of the possibilities of their performance, specifically in the selection of their repertoire. Both mentioned that their teachers would often make the final decision as to what was allowed to be played in the recital, with some academic programs outlining specific requirements. Nicole also discussed that in her program in a music conservatory, the environment was highly competitive and certain classes required auditions. The ability to receive instruction from these teachers and feedback from their fellow students was thus restricted by both the individual's skills and the academic set-up of the program.
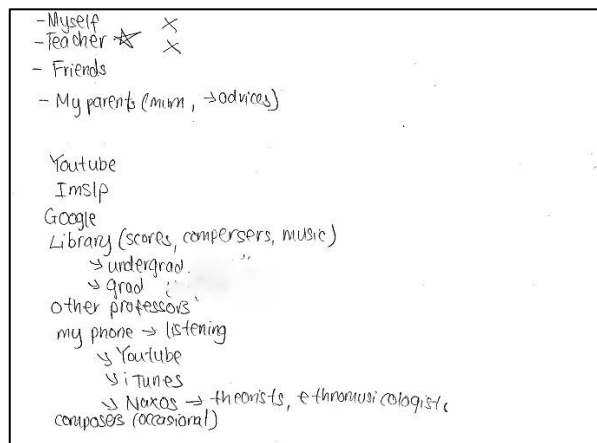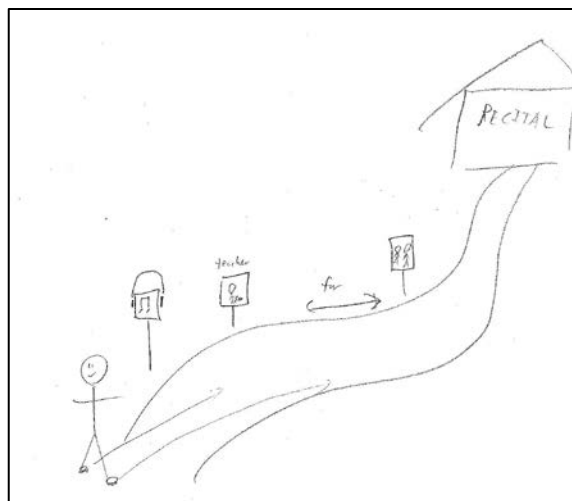

Figure 2. Nicole's information horizon map

Figure 3. Adrian's information horizon map

DISCUSSION
The students' descriptions of informational resources corresponded with the previous studies discussed above which identified conventional, interactional, and digital resources in music, though the students in my study relied most heavily on interactional and digital resources (Kostagiolas et al., 2013; Lavranos et al., 2015). While two students still made great use of the library, more of their engagement with resources took place outside the library which brings back the need for future research to really understand and address students' informational needs (Dougan, 2012; Myers & Ishimura, 2016).

As limitations imposed by academic environments were not initially in focus at the onset of this study, it can perhaps

explain why the students' answers are limited in scope as the interview guide was not set up with this in mind. However, the nature of being in an academic program, as opposed to Kostagiolas et al's (2013) research on amateur musicians, was reflected in their information horizons as the students had access to many teachers and other students who guide them and provide feedback throughout the process. As well, the final recital itself is a requirement for graduation and so the weight of this performance can have an impact on the scope of resources students access and how deeply they engage with them.

With the recital, I found that Hektor's (2003) Information Activities model provided the best insights on the students' behaviours in enacting and creating their individual musical style. One of the information activities Hektor describes is the act of dressing – that is, imparting information in a new way through some creation of a product, and tying in the individual's thoughts and opinions through this exchange. This definition very closely aligns with how the students described preparing their performance, as their emphasis on maintaining their own unique style was always at the heart of the process. In taking the information they gathered or acquired, they were selective in how they used this towards their performance, taking care to avoid outright imitation of another musician. Their final recital, just as Hektor (2003) says that "you are what you wear", serves to showcase who they are as an artist (p. 137).

Future research would likely benefit from focusing on an area I chose to avoid, that of the role emotions play into the information-seeking process. Despite avoiding it, it still arose as some participants brought up performance anxiety, an area I had not previously considered. One student jokingly stated that the first step in his preparation is to have a mental breakdown, and while the others mentioned anxiety as having perhaps tempered their preparation, they claimed to be largely unperturbed by any pre-performance jitters. The population may have played some hand in this, as I interviewed graduate students who were invited to reflect on their past recital, which occurred two years ago for two informants. It would serve to explore how students in the moment of preparation, such as undergraduates months from their performance, would respond to questions of anxiety and how it may affect their information-seeking behaviours.

METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS
While the IHI technique revealed interesting data, some difficulties arose due to a lack of experience with the technique. I was able to better develop my questions to suit my subjects as I progressed through the interviews, so this current study feels better suited as a trial run in preparation for a larger population.

I also found that the diagrams were of mixed relevance. While one issue was that the students did not understand the term 'resource' and required additional explanation, only Adrian's diagram provided a clear and insightful view of his information-seeking process. The others' maps did not provide additional data beyond what was gained from the interviews and did not lead to creative interpretations. In future studies, integrating the diagrams into the interview portion by encouraging subjects to draw as they answered questions would likely resolve the disconnect between the two sections.

CONCLUSION
My study explored the informational behaviours of undergraduate music students in preparing for their final graduating recital using Sonnenwald et al.'s (2001) IHI technique. I found that students predominantly used social and digital resources, such as their teachers and peers, as well as online video databases and music streaming sites, though of these they cited digital forms as their preferred resource. Also, while the motivation to be unique in their performance guided many of the students' decisions, the academic environment produced limits that partially impeded their creativity.

To understand their behaviour, Hektor's (2003) Information Activities model was applied, which clearly correlates the activity of dressing with the students' preparation of their recitals, as the students took the information they had acquired and gave it their own spin to showcase their unique musical style.

In my early analysis, I initially looked for examples of each of Hektor's information activities and found that all but two of them could be identified, those of instructing and publishing. Both of these fall under Hektor's (2003) 'giving' category, where dressing is under both 'giving' and 'communicating'. The students' recital, then, is the only chance they have to impart knowledge on others rather than be receivers, so it is poignant that so much attention in the program is devoted to this opportunity.

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AUTHOR'S BIO

Sam Frederick is currently a Master of Information candidate in the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto, studying in the Archives and Records Management stream. A graduate of the University of Manitoba with a BA in Linguistics, she is interested in issues of access, especially those concerning language, as they relate to the fields of library and archival studies.

APPENDIX 1

Interview Guide

1. Can you tell me about how you got started with music?

2. Can you describe your undergraduate program, the assignments and performances it involved?

 a. Did you have a final recital?

3. Can you bring me through the process of preparing for your final recital?

 a. How did you select your music?

 b. If you came across something difficult in practicing, what or who would you go to for help?

 c. What kind of resources did you access – print, video, audio?

 d. Do you have any pre-show rituals or warm-ups, methods of relieving performance anxiety? Where did you learn these?

Information Horizon map instructions:

4. This next part involves a drawing exercise, something called an information horizon map. So can you draw yourself anywhere on the paper and then draw in any of the resources you access when preparing for your final recital, and explain it aloud as you draw?

5. Do you have an order you tend to go in accessing these resources? Which one do you tend to go to first? Any back and forth?

6. Do you have a preference among these resources, one you favour over the others? [among all resources as well as within certain types identified, i.e. among video resources]

APPENDIX 2

Interview Quotes

Jason Interview:

Q1: Can you tell me how you got started in music?

A1: […] I was never an amazing player or anything, and then I got to high school and suddenly it's kind of cool to be in a band or take music class and goof around with your friends and then it was just like this explosion of music in my life and it was all I wanted to do every moment of the day.

Q2: If you came across anything that you didn't know how to play or any difficulties in that, were there people or resources you reached out to?

A2: Yeah typically, well it depends on the teacher […] I think I had like a series of the stereotypical hard-nosed music teachers which was fine. In a lot of ways it taught me discipline but I wouldn't say in terms of handling mental health, stress and things like that, I wouldn't say it was the best resource.

My parents were probably my best resource for support in those situations. Typically it's not easy to rely upon colleagues in music school because there is an element of competition amongst one another.

Nicole Interview:

Q1: Do you have any warmup rituals or anything you're doing just before you go on stage?

A1: […] Eat tons of bananas 'cause that helps with your nervousness by the way I think. …

Q1: Is that something you've learned from your teachers?

A1: Peers, teachers, research, actually I remember my undergrad teacher saying eating one banana doesn't help, you need a tree of bananas. For me, let's say I have the concert at night, I eat one banana in the morning, one banana at noon, one banana like one hour before I perform.

It really helps, I don't know why it's like magic. And my other musician friends have tried it and it helps too but again your psychological attitude depends on the individual. Some people get really nervous but I think that's a good thing because it shows you care about your performance.

Q2: Who were some of the pianists that you said were your favourites to go to?

A2: […] In terms of looking towards specific artists, it's dangerous because for example one artist you can listen to it but you might not want to incorporate their ideas because it's very out of the norm, for example with a lot of the old musicians.

So you would want to get inspiration, right? But there are artists where you can consider what they do and you can literally copy it in your playing, but again in the end you have to make it your own, right? Everything comes together but you have to make it your own playing.

Adrian Interview:

Q1: Do you have a preference among the audio resources you access?

A1: Personally I really like having the recording on my computer. I'm a stickler for organizing all my recordings by like- you know how you rip a CD onto your computer. I want to make sure every single track has the correct title and the correct artist so that if I want to go find something I can just type that in my computer.

Q2: The next part of this interview is called an information horizon map, so you can put yourself on this map and then draw in any of the people and resources that you used when preparing for your final recital

A2: What I would say is here's me and you have equipment to get to a destination and here's my destination [drawing stick figure, road, and house]. My destination is the final recital, and I have a means of getting there which is I can play the horn. I'm going to draw some rollerblades, that's going to be my analogy. But you have to get there in steps, so if this whole distance is really far then I need to work on my means of getting there.

APPENDIX 3

Information Horizon Maps

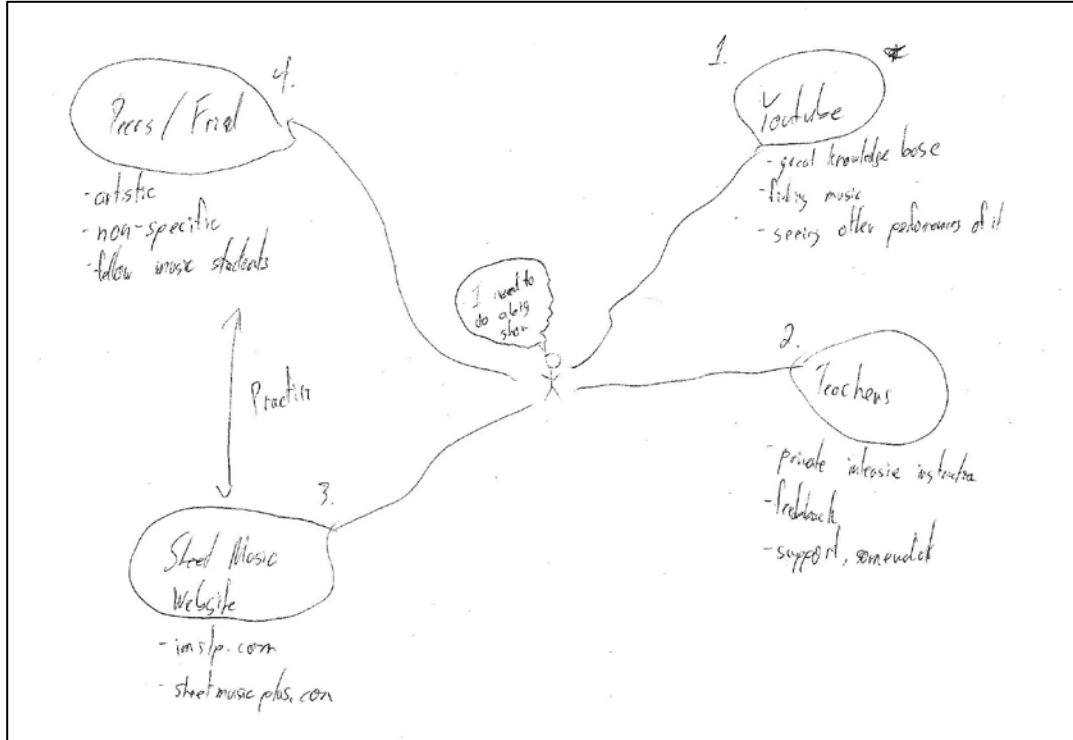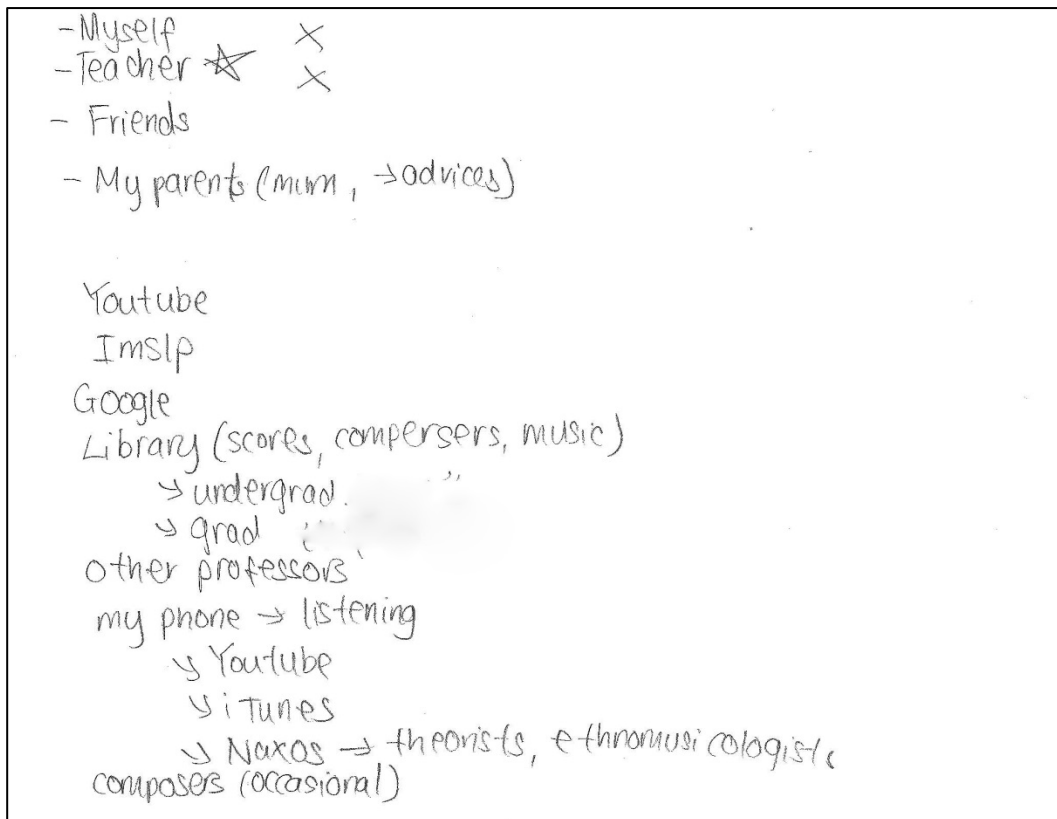Figure 1: Jason's Information Horizon Map

Figure 2: Nicole's Information Horizon Map

Figure 3: Adrian's Information Horizon Map