

More to a skilled ear in music

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The first pilot study in Australia to give musicians the skills and training to critically assess music by what they hear rather than what they see begins this month at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. The study aims to address a lack of skill and formal training in the industry that enables music judges to critically assess sound - an important skill when it comes to auditions and judging music in the 'real world'.

Leading the research is Dr Helen Mitchell, a senior lecturer in musicology at the University of Sydney's Conservatorium of Music, following a grant received by the Federal Government in June this year.

The study builds on previous research by Dr Mitchell in 2011 and 2012, which found that musicians are not reliable in recognising the sound quality of individual performers and use limited descriptors to articulate sound.

"Music judges or assessors are generally not well equipped to assess sound. The difficulty lies in the availability of common descriptors or language to express what we hear. People find it hard to critically quantify or qualify sound or what they are hearing when listening to music," said Dr Mitchell.

"We take for granted that musicians can readily discriminate between performers playing the same instrument. Remarkably, research¹ has shown that judges often can't identify individual performers from a homogeneous line-up of musicians.

"In the real world, we not only rely on expert musicians to differentiate between performers but, more critically, judge performances to determine an individual's suitability for a specific music role."

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that even expert musicians are unable to judge audio-only and audio-visual music performances in the same way. Recent research² has found that judges are often influenced by the 'vision' of performers, at the expense of what they hear.

"Whilst it is consistently recognised in the industry that sound is the critical factor when evaluating music performance. Judges still turn to visuals as their primary source of information for evaluating a performance. In fact, music examiners have been noted to cite a performer's dress and stage manner ahead of describing [sound quality](#)."

The pilot project will see tertiary students from the Sydney Conservatorium of Music take part in a series of practical sessions, playing the roles of judge and performer. They will experience performances both visible to a judging panel and behind a screen - replicating the blind audition process, which removes all visual factors that may influence judges.

The verbal and written critique delivered by judges in the study will be shared with Australian experts in music auditions and examinations to reflect on the best practice in performance evaluation.

"This project will also enable music students to experience the complexities and pitfalls of performance evaluation. They will learn from music industry experts and develop training strategies to advance their listening acuity for performing and performer evaluation," said Dr Mitchell.

The findings of the Australian study will inform future music education curricula to ensure that there is a high standard of music assessment delivered by the next generation of [music](#) leaders and experts in this country.

More information: ¹Mitchell & MacDonald 2011, 2012, 2014
²Tsay, 2013

Provided by University of Sydney

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