

Authors        Dr Andrea Creech (corresponding author)  
                  Dr Ioulia Papageorgi  
                  Prof. Graham Welch

## **Concepts of ideal musicians**

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the concepts of ‘ideal musicians’ constructed by advanced performers of Western classical, jazz, popular and Scottish traditional music. The question of whether there continues to be a persistent dominant discourse concerned with concepts of ideal musicians in the Western tradition, or whether alternative discourses are evident, is explored. Secondly, in order to address the question of whether concepts of ideal musicians are fixed or malleable, concepts evident amongst undergraduate performers are compared with those held by professional musicians. Analysis of quantitative data (N = 244) measuring beliefs about the nature of musical expertise is presented together with qualitative narratives generated from in-depth interviews with twenty-seven advanced performers representing four musical genres. A prevailing concept of an ideal musician is offered, whereby absolute expertise (encompassing innate talent and creativity), together with facets of personality that include communication, control, perseverance, integrity, confidence and ‘goal-driven’, underpins a commitment to excellence. This commitment to excellence in turn is conceptualized as the foundation stone of musical versatility and expertise in a range of musical performance skills. This research points to the need for future research that explores the tacit influence concepts of ideal musicians have on higher education music curricula, music assessment strategies and music funding policies. Furthermore, research is warranted that investigates the ways in which contemporary concepts of ideal musicians impact upon musicians’ aspirations and musical self-efficacy as well as learning and performance strategies.

### **Background**

A traditional discourse representing concepts of ideal musicianship permeates texts concerned with Western classical music and can be traced back to nineteenth century Romanticism (Lowinsky, 1964). This discourse positions the ideal musician as someone whose primary responsibility is to rise above technical matters, ‘to increase his sensitivity to the inner spirit of the music and to communicate this spirit to others’ (Sigel, 1966, p. 65). Great musicians, according to Fano and Gregory (1917, p. 339), ‘aspire to widen the horizons of technical

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expression in musical art'. Music critic, conductor, pianist and composer E.T.A. Hoffman, whose life spanned the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, claimed that 'to move us mightily, the artist must be deeply affected in his own heart' (Hoffman cited in Harich, 1924, as cited in Lowinsky, 1964, p. 325). Robert Schumann (1849, cited in MacDonald, 2002 p. 527) elucidated this view when he stated that

You are not musical if, eyes glued nervously to the notes, you play a piece painfully through to the end. ... But you are, if with a new piece you almost sense what is coming, if with a familiar one you know it completely. In a word, if you have music not just in your fingers but in your head and your heart.

Earlier accounts of ideal musicianship do not persistently privilege 'creative gifts'. In Bach's time, for example 'one does not yet speak of depth of feeling, originality or personal approach ... these things lay outside of the Baroque world of thought' (Schering, 1941, cited in Lowinsky, 1964, p.323). However, Rousseau (1768, cited in Lowinsky, 1964, p. 326) defines musical genius as '...either you have it – then you feel it yourself – or you don't – then you will never know it. The genius of the musician subjects the entire universe to his art. ... the passions he expresses he awakens also in his listener's heart'.

Frederickson and Rooney (1988) suggest that professional classical musicians aspire to an ideal that comprises artistic accomplishment, recognition, uniqueness, creativity and expressivity. Ideal musicians, according to this view, are dedicated to artistic performance and engaged in expressive tasks requiring recognition and aesthetic responses from audiences. This notion reflects the view of Westby (1960), who describes idealized self-images of symphony musicians as gifted and highly skilled artists with strong commitments to aesthetic values.

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Hargreaves (1996) describes an ultimate musical professional phase, whereby an individual at the pinnacle of musical development demonstrates both mastery and the capacity for self-reflection, as well as the ability to transcend conventions. In Swanick and Tillman's (1986) spiral model of musical development the highest metacognitive mode is distinguished by the ability to reflect upon and convey emotional and expressive power in music, with this being guided by universal understandings about music. However, Bennett (2007, p. 185) challenged traditional concepts of the ideal musician as performer, asserting that an ideal musician in the music profession of the twenty-first century requires more than an elite standard of professional performance practice. 'In addition to performance skills, musicians require the skills to run a small business, the confidence to create new opportunities, pedagogical and communication skills for use in educational, ensemble and community settings, industry knowledge and strong professional networks.' This view, suggesting that the concept of 'musician' needs to 'encompass more than the ability to demonstrate musical performance skills' has similarly been put forth by O'Neill (2002, p. 79).

Ideology in relation to musical expertise thus reflects notions of 'absolute expertise', whereby 'greatness or creativity arises from ... unique innate talent' (Chi, 2006, p. 22) as well as an alternative relational approach to expertise, whereby ideal musicians may be identified and described in relation to those judged to be less accomplished in the domain (ibid). The former perspective on musical excellence is critiqued by Howe, Davidson and Sloboda (1998) who contend that the extent to which musical potential may be realized is influenced more by environmental factors such as training and practise than by any potentially genetically determined individual differences in special abilities. However, the competing discourse of 'mystery'

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(relating to innate talent) and ‘mastery’ (relating to acquired expertise) were found to be prominent in the constructions of musical identities amongst professional jazz musicians (Wilson & MacDonald, 2005).

Lehamann, Sloboda and Woody (2007) emphasize the central role that musical mental representations play in underpinning socially constructed views of musical expertise. According to this view, developing musicians actively participate in their conceptual development by constructing mental representations of their musical ideals (Astuti, Solomon & Carey, 2004). These ideals in turn serve as a framework for musical aspirations, musical self-efficacy and musical self-regulation.

Mental representations of musical expertise have recently been the focus of research carried out by Welch, Duffy, Potter and Whyton. (2006) who undertook a two-year comparative study of advanced musical performance (‘Investigating Musical Performance’). The IMP project was devised to investigate how classical, popular, jazz and Scottish traditional musicians deepen and develop their learning about performance in undergraduate, postgraduate and wider music community contexts. Using survey methods, the researchers found that while classical musicians emphasized the drive to excel musically and technically and prioritized notation-based skills, other-than-classical musicians attached greater importance to memorising and improvising. Many musicians, across genres, indicated that they believed expert performers to be in possession of skills that could be transferred to other musical genres and even other domains. However, the musicians differed in their beliefs about the role of analytical skills in relation to expert performance; classical musicians tended to agree more strongly than musicians representing the other genres that skills such as problem-solving, self-monitoring and addressing errors

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contributed to performance expertise (Creech et al., 2008). Variability in the views of advanced musicians about the nature of musical expertise could be accounted for by a number of factors. These included the extent to which they 1) considered themselves to be in control of their own musical skills, 2) attributed high importance to learning and self-regulation skills, 3) demonstrated high self-esteem and low levels of trait anxiety, 4) demonstrated high musical performance self-efficacy, 5) derived pleasure from musical activities and 6) attributed high importance to musical skills and expertise-related qualities (Papageorgi et al., in press).

The research presented in this paper is drawn from the ‘Investigating Musical Performance’ study (Welch et al., 2006), noted above. This paper explores the views put forth by participants in relation to specific facets of musical expertise and identifies the concepts of ideal musicians held by a sample of advanced performers of classical, jazz, popular and Scottish traditional music. Conceptual understanding of ‘ideal musician’ is considered, in this paper, as a product of discourse within communities of practice, with conceptual change representing a change in discourse practice (Greeno & van de Sande, 2007). In the first instance this paper investigates the aspects of performance expertise that are privileged and prioritized amongst this sample of expert performers. Secondly, this paper addresses the question of whether there continues to be a persistent dominant discourse concerned with concepts of ideal musicians in the Western music tradition, or whether alternative discourses are evident amongst this sample of musicians. Finally, this paper considers whether mental representations of ideal musicians remain stable or may be malleable, as musicians gain professional experience.

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## **Method**

### **Quantitative data**

Two hundred and forty-four ( $n = 244$ ) musicians were surveyed, including 170 (70%) undergraduates in UK Higher Education Institutions and 74 (30%) professional musicians who were following an active performing and teaching career in the UK. The participants represented four musical genres within the Western tradition that included jazz ( $n = 45$ ), Scottish traditional ( $n = 16$ ), popular ( $n = 66$ ) and classical music ( $n = 117$ ). Fifty-five percent of the participants were male and 45% were female.

In addition to demographic information, the musicians provided self-reports about their earliest engagement with music, their first instrumental or vocal training, their secondary education and significant musical experiences and influences. The participants were questioned about their attitudes towards the relevance of a range of musical skills and activities, how they spent their time and the pleasure they derived from engagement in musical activities, as well as their beliefs about the nature of expertise in musical performance and teaching. The specific scale representing attitudes towards the nature of musical performance expertise, explored in this paper, was based on the facets of musical expertise proposed by Hallam (2005). Respondents were asked to respond to a series of statements using a seven point Likert scale representing views ranging from disagree to agree (Table 1). The scale was found to have strong overall internal reliability (Cronbach Alpha = .77) (Papageorgi et al., in press).

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**Table 1: Attitudes towards the nature of expertise and excellence in musical performance**

1.	A highly skilled musician cannot automatically transfer their skills to another area of human behaviour
2.	A highly skilled musician cannot automatically transfer their skills to another musical genre (such as from classical to jazz, pop or traditional music)
3.	Expert performers are much more competent in reading musical notation
4.	Expert performers are much quicker at learning new music than those less skilled
5.	Expert performers have superior musical memory
6.	Expert performers have more refined problem-solving skills
7.	Expert performers spend a great deal of time analysing a significant musical problem before attempting a solution
8.	A highly skilled musician is better at self-monitoring
9.	A highly skilled musician is better at knowing how to address errors
10.	A highly skilled musician is better at sustaining skills

Analysis of the quantitative data was carried out using SPSS (Field, 2000). In addition to descriptive statistics independent T tests were calculated in order to discern differences between professionals and undergraduates in relation to their attitudes towards specific facets of the performance expertise scale.

### **Qualitative data**

In-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews were carried out with twenty-seven of the survey respondents, between January and April 2007. The interviewees included undergraduate musicians (up to age 21), musicians in the first stages of their professional careers

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(aged 22-27) and musicians who had established themselves as professional musicians (aged 28 and above). Eleven females and 16 males were interviewed, representing jazz, Scottish traditional, popular and Western classical musical genres (Table 2).

**Table 2: Characteristics of interviewees**

Gender	Age	Professional musician		Undergraduate		Total
		Classical	Other than classical	Classical	Other than classical	
Female	Up to 21			2	1 ST* 1 jazz	4
	22-27					
	28 and above	5	1 jazz 1 ST*			7
Male	Up to 21			4	1 ST* 1 jazz 2 pop	8
	22-27		1 ST* 2 jazz 1 pop			4
	28 and above	2	1 jazz 1 pop			4
<b>Total</b>		7	8	6	6	27

\*Scottish Traditional

The interviews were transcribed and a thematic analysis was undertaken using the approach known as empirical phenomenology, following the guidelines laid out by Cooper and Macintyre (1993). Transcripts were read in sample batches of five, and themes relating to the research questions were identified. These themes were grounded in the text, and translated into coding categories drawn directly from the text itself. As each new sample of transcripts was read the coding scheme was tested and revised. The process was repeated until all text had been



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examined in relation to the coding scheme, and points of difference and similarity amongst texts had been identified. NVivo software (Bazeley, 2007) facilitated the coding process and organisation of the qualitative data. Coding reports were generated by NVivo and exported into SPSS (Field, 2000) in order to provide a descriptive comparison of the prominence assigned to various themes in the musicians' accounts.

Narrative accounts of each theme were created; these narratives are representative of musicians' views from each of the genre groups and status groups (undergraduate or professional musician) who articulated the particular theme. Whilst acknowledging that interpretation presented as narrative thus resembles a 'storied account' with the researcher positioned within the constructed account (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p.278), it is important to note that every effort was made to coherently represent the concepts articulated by the participants.

## **Results**

### **Quantitative results**

Overall, there were relatively high mean scores for each of the statements on the scale measuring beliefs about musical expertise (Table 3). Some ambivalence was evident in relation to the notion that expert performers possess transferable skills, with a relatively large amount of variability in responses to these first two statements on the scale. Participants generally did agree that expert musicians are competent in reading musical notation, quick at learning new music, possess superior musical memory and have refined problem-solving skills and analytical skills. There was strong agreement that, in relation to less skilled musicians, highly skilled musicians are better at self-monitoring and addressing errors and possess better sustaining skills.

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**Table 3: Overall means and standard deviations for each statement on the scale for musical performance expertise**

	N	Mean*	Std. Deviation
A highly skilled musician cannot automatically transfer their skills to another area of human behaviour.	238	4.18	2.026
A highly skilled musician cannot automatically transfer their skills to another musical genre.	240	3.98	1.993
Expert performers are much more competent in reading musical notation.	240	3.89	1.898
Expert performers are much quicker at learning new music than those less skilled.	239	4.96	1.652
Expert performers have superior musical memory.	239	4.34	1.707
Expert performers have more refined problem-solving skills.	238	4.37	1.670
Expert performers spend a great deal of time analysing a significant musical problem before attempting a solution.	239	4.37	1.574
A highly skilled musician is better at self-monitoring.	240	5.03	1.519
A highly skilled musician is better at knowing how to address errors.	239	5.26	1.437
A highly skilled musician is better at sustaining skills.	239	5.24	1.446

\* 1 = disagree, 7 = agree

An independent samples t-test revealed significant differences between undergraduate ( $\underline{M}$  = 3.78) and professional musicians ( $\underline{M}$  = 4.45) with respect to attitudes towards transferable skills; although there was moderate agreement amongst all of the musicians that skills could automatically be transferred between musical genres, the professional musicians demonstrated lower mean agreement with this statement. Similarly, significant differences were found with respect to statements concerned with problem-solving (professionals:  $\underline{M}$  = 4.82, undergraduates:

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$\underline{M}$  = 4.17), self-monitoring (professionals:  $\underline{M}$  = 5.59, undergraduates:  $\underline{M}$  = 4.80), knowing how to address errors (professionals:  $\underline{M}$  = 5.76, undergraduates:  $\underline{M}$  = 5.04) and sustaining skills (professionals  $\underline{M}$  = 5.69, undergraduates:  $\underline{M}$  = 5.05). In each case, although there were high mean scores amongst both groups, professional musicians agreed more strongly than undergraduates that these skills were aspects of musical expertise (Table 4).

**Table 4: Differences between undergraduate and professional musicians in beliefs about musical expertise (Undergraduates N = 170; Professionals N = 74)**

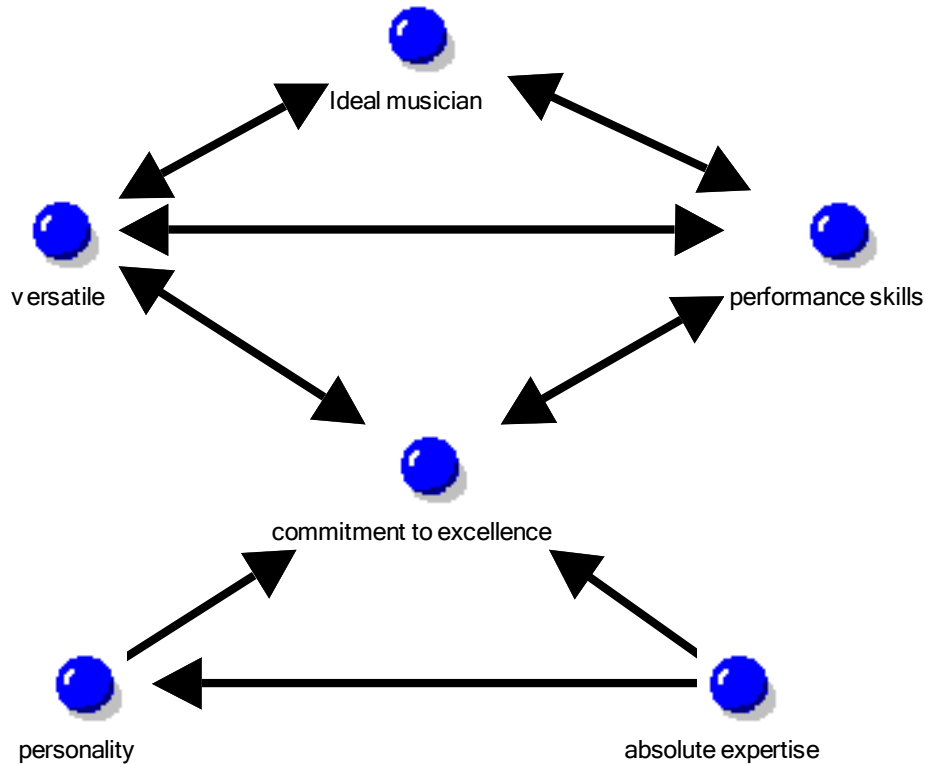
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
A highly skilled musician cannot automatically transfer their skills to another musical genre.	-2.245	114.4*	.027	-.670
A highly skilled musician is better at self-monitoring.	-3.791	238	.001	-.793
A highly skilled musician is better at knowing how to address errors.	-3.623	237	.001	-.719
A highly skilled musician is better at sustaining skills.	-3.168	237	.002	-.637

\* Equal variance not assumed

## Qualitative results

Thematic analyses of in-depth interviews with twenty-seven musicians revealed an account of ideal musicians whereby aspects of musical expertise, as represented and measured in the quantitative data (above) were embedded within a more complex model. According to this model, ideal musicians were conceptualised as those whose performance skills and musical versatility were underpinned by specific personality factors, innate absolute expertise and a commitment to excellence (Figure 1)

Figure 1: Discourse relating to concepts of ideal musicians



### Personalities of ideal musicians

Several sub-themes relating to an overarching theme of ‘personality qualities’ were found.

Undergraduates and professional musicians conceptualized the personalities of ideal musicians in terms of ‘communication’, ‘control’, ‘perseverance’ and ‘integrity’. Amongst the professional musicians, but not evident in the texts from the undergraduates, two additional themes of ‘confidence’ and ‘goal-driven’ were found. In total, sixteen passages from the professional

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musicians' texts were coded as personality characteristics contributing to concepts of ideal musicians, while six texts from undergraduate musicians were coded in this way. Thus, although all of the musicians engaged in a discourse relating to dimensions of personality, the professional musicians were found to speak more extensively and in greater details about the contribution various characteristics of personality made to their representations of ideal musicians.

Professional and undergraduate musicians from all four musical genres contributed to this composite narrative of ideal musicianship:

(An ideal musician is) trying to express something that is inexpressible in other means (classical.) Completely focused on... just practice all the time. Everything that you do should be to advance yourself as a musician (jazz). You need to be very confident ... To be a good performer you have to have a sort of imperviousness to danger, you have to enjoy danger, which means that you have to have a sort of inner strength, which is very powerful. And also personality - the sort of virtuoso showman kind of thing (classical). Someone who had very good communication skills ... I think they would need to be able to draw people in and to find ways of making the music comprehensible and accessible to people in order to generate audiences (jazz). I admire people with a sense of purpose ... I think anybody who just goes for it really, but with real passion and definitely things that stir things up and cause people to laugh or to cry. If you want to make somebody cry then don't do it in half measures. Put them in tears for either a good reason or a bad reason (popular). Somebody who knows what they want and they've gone out there and achieved that. Internal drive, because you have to be able to dedicate a lot of time and energy to go for that and nothing else over a number of years (classical). They also work extremely hard practising. I think you've got to have an amazing character anyway, other than the phenomenal technique, and you've got to be very single minded. A level of discipline that I could only aspire to (Scottish traditional). A very high degree of technical competence, but they would have the musical intuition not to have to demonstrate it all the time (jazz). You have to have humility as a performer; if your ego is too powerful, as it very-very often is, then you're not going to be really the best. To my mind, the very best performers have that sense of humility (classical). Somebody who is in control of their own musical destiny (popular). It's a musical performance at the end of the day... I don't think there's any real rules about right or wrong (Scottish traditional).

### **Absolute expertise**

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A discourse that identified and described ideal musicians in terms of natural, innate talent and creativity was evident in the texts of undergraduates and professional musicians. In total, twelve passages of text from the professional musicians and nine from the undergraduates were coded under the theme of ‘talent’, while fifteen passages of professional musicians’ texts and nine from the undergraduates were coded as ‘creativity’.

Notions of talent and creativity pervaded the mental representations of ideal musicians put forth by professional musicians (including all genres).

(An ideal musician is) massive talent, a hugely able musician, prodigiously talented musician. I do believe in ability, natural ability but then it has to be cultivated in the right way (classical). You’ve got to have some talent. There’s a lot of people making music with no talent but they’ve got the technology which is sort of irritating as well (popular). Talent ... She was multi-talented too. I think a lot of it is their natural abilities (Scottish traditional). Ideally...to have a vision of what you want to do with your music and where you want your music to go and to try to transcend this notion of quality (jazz). What I think is unique about them and important is that they found their own sound and they found their own way of making music. That’s someone who’s just brimming over with love of music. So, no, I think it’s got to be all internal really (classical).

Undergraduates (representing all genres) also highlighted the notion of talent:

The musician that I would love to be ... is someone who is naturally very very musical, not naturally just very good at an instrument, but whatever they do, whatever instrument they play, music comes out. I really admire that in people (classical). ... I would love to be a natural musician who is creative and original. I think that’s important in any music (jazz). I think there's a spectrum on talent and work and depending on how talented you are, you can either not have to work very hard and get a satisfactory result, but if you're not very talented you can work very hard and achieve, I wouldn't say as much (classical). Obviously some people are more gifted (popular). (Ideal musicians are) highly talented in whatever they choose to do (Scottish traditional).

### **Pursuit of excellence**

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Representations of personality factors together with innate talent and creativity underpinned the concept of commitment to excellence, which in turn was found to be a foundation stone of the notion of an ‘ideal musician’. Three sub-themes coded as ‘perfectionism’, ‘excellence’ and ‘rising to musical challenge’ were subsumed under the overarching theme of ‘pursuit of excellence’. Nine passages of text from the professional musicians (representing all four genres) were coded under this overarching category, while just one passage from the undergraduates (musical genre: classical) was coded in this way.

An ideal musician is somebody who’s technically very-very accomplished (Scottish traditional)... phenomenal technique (classical)... a very high degree of technical competence, ... able to play fluently whatever it was that they wanted to do on their instrument (jazz) I admire (the ideal musician) for what he did with an instrument and the places he took it and challenged even people who thought that they would not need challenging (popular)...a stickler for detail (classical). Oh, refinement! Delicacy and refinement and fastidiousness and, I mean and such a complete musician because she seems to be able to penetrate into the style and heart of the style of...the music that means the most to me (classical).

### **Performance skills**

Performance skills, including knowledge of repertoire, musicianship, memory and ensemble skills were evident in the discourses relating to ideal musicians generated by undergraduate and professional musicians alike. Six passages of text relating to performance skills were coded amongst the undergraduates’ texts, while eight passages were coded in the texts from the professional musicians. Classical professional musicians in particular expounded the discourse of individuality in musicianship:

You have to develop your artistic side. What you have then is the beginnings of musical, of deep musical skill. But then you have to learn about all the things that produce this music, which you want to try to interpret, you have to learn about the context, you have to learn about the history and the philosophy, you know. You also have to allow yourself to

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melt into the music, to absorb it, to find in it what's there ... You've got to find a sort of softness, in order to make yourself sensitive to those things in music. You need to have a fantastic memory. (An ideal musician is) totally musical, charismatic, absolutely loves his playing. I think he's phenomenal (classical).

Both jazz and classical musicians highlighted the importance of ensemble playing, in their conceptions of ideal musicians:

Incredible musicality, magnificent ensemble playing. You need that ensemble feel. It's convincing. It's so musical. Their understanding of what they're doing, their intelligence comes through. And I think that really is what you listen to (classical). They didn't necessarily spend too long practising on their own, to developing their own way of playing, but much more evolved within a community of musicians that they're part of. I think that way of being a musician, who you're not the lone virtuoso musician, sort of out there defining themselves through that, you're actually part of a group of musicians and you define yourself through the musical relationships that you have, but at the same time you still have a vision (jazz).

Undergraduate musicians representing classical, jazz and Scottish Traditional music referred to aspects of individual and ensemble musicianship in their accounts of ideal musicians:

(An ideal musician is) someone who has an enthusiasm for the repertoire (classical). It's important to have a knowledge of all the repertoire and be excited about it all (Scottish traditional). An ideal musician - someone with a good memory, I think! Someone who has a huge awareness of what they're trying to portray, I think, in whatever genre that may be (classical). (My ideal is) playing in ensemble and doing something with other people - I think that's quite important (jazz).

### **Versatility**

The theme of versatility was given equal prominence by the undergraduate and professional musicians, with each group generating six passages of text relating to versatility in their accounts of ideal musicians.



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Undergraduate musicians representing all of the musical genres alluded to concepts of musical versatility:

(An ideal musician) is expert in a range of genres, certainly (classical). (Ideal musicians) play what is needed. Any more than that is too much. ...if they have to take the lead, to take the lead; and if they have to sit back, to sit back. That is my whole approach (popular). A jack of all trades, would be my overall best musician, that's somebody not who would just be considered a trumpet player but somebody who could sit down in a recording session, a jazz session, folk, anything, an all round, anything (classical). Versatility as well. That's the thing - you don't learn an instrument - you've got to be able to sit down and do everything, If you're a musician, it shouldn't really matter what you do (classical). It's a musical performance at the end of the day. ... they (musicians) need to really broaden their mind out and decide just what's musical performance instead this whole idea of by the book, sort of thing which is, seems to be the rule everywhere nowadays (Scottish traditional). Very good musicians, because they do listen for everything in music all over the world, any sort of influences they can, and they do it in their music, and that's what makes them different, that's what makes them stand out (Scottish traditional). (An ideal musician is) available to play in lots of different styles and do whatever anybody asks of them. Being able to play a lot of different styles is important to me; to be able to say "yeah, I'll do that no problem" (popular).

Similarly, professional musicians representing all of the four musical genres placed a high value on musical versatility.

(An ideal musician) will work in any genre, jazz, concert band, hard core rock and punk projects, but also classical ...at a very high level (popular). The profession has changed so much now that it's not really a lot of space to specialise. An ideal classical musician for me is somebody who's not just into classical music (classical). You know, I've got a broad taste in music and I've listened to everything from jazz to rock, to pop... yeah, everything. I think it's important to get inspiration from lots of... lots of sources, really. I think that makes into a better musician, more rounded and more open-minded (classical). That feeling of being able to take things anywhere and being able to work together to create something on the spur of the moment... I find that it's really exhilarating...very challenging intellectually, emotionally, musically (jazz). An ideal musician is somebody who is very-very secure in their own tradition, but who is also quite happy to take influences from other traditions and leave out what they don't like (Scottish traditional).

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## **Discussion**

The quantitative results suggested that musical skills, analytical skills, self-regulation skills and the ability to sustain concentration were privileged as desirable aspects of musical expertise.

Assuming that notions about the nature of musical performance expertise are encompassed within concepts of ideal musicians, these results highlight some specific aspects of musical expertise that may form part of a prevailing concept of what it means to be an ideal musician.

The quantitative results furthermore suggested that, in relation to the undergraduates, professional musicians placed a higher value on self-reflective skills such as problem solving, self-regulation and sustaining. This evidence suggests that, as Hargreaves (1996) as well as Swanick and Tillman (1986) suggest in their models, self-reflection may become more highly privileged in the concepts of ideal musicians held by musicians who are in the latter stages of the development of artistic personality.

A pervasive vision of an ‘ideal musician’, evident amongst the musicians who were interviewed, was represented in a model of concepts of ideal musicians (Figure 1, above). Although professional musicians placed a greater emphasis and elaborated in greater detail on various aspects of this representation of an ideal musician, the model was found to be evident in the texts of undergraduates and professional musicians across the four musical genres. According to this model, an ideal musician first and foremost has some degree of what Chi (2006) refers to as ‘absolute expertise’, encompassing innate talent and creativity. This talent account (critiqued by Howe et al., 1998) was conceptualised as underpinning a strong and enduring commitment to musical excellence, in combination with personality characteristics that

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included communication, control, perseverance, integrity, confidence and being goal-driven (the latter two facets of personality evidenced only in the texts of professional musicians). The discourse relating to musical excellence encompassed a range of individual performance skills, including musicianship, memory and knowledge of repertoire. These themes were prominent amongst the texts generated by classical professional musicians in particular. In contrast, professional musicians who identified themselves as belonging to the jazz or Scottish traditional genres emphasized ensemble skills in their accounts of ideal musicians. Accounts from the undergraduates (representing all of the genres except popular music) suggested that both individual and ensemble skills were given prominence in their conceptions of the ideal musician.

Quantitative results suggested that there was moderate agreement amongst this sample of advanced performers that musical expertise involves skills that may be transferred between musical genres and even to other domains. It is perhaps surprising that there was not stronger agreement in relation to this point, given that a prominent theme privileging the idea of versatility was found in the qualitative text. One interpretation of this apparent anomaly is that while musical versatility may be valued and even aspired to it is not a quality that expert musicians ‘automatically’ (as the questionnaire suggested) demonstrate. An alternative interpretation is that, while versatility may be conceptualized as a necessary part of musical expertise (as Bennet (2007) would suggest), it does not form a prominent part of the notion of ideal musicianship. It is also noteworthy that undergraduate musicians indicated that they agreed more strongly than professionals that highly skilled musicians could transfer their skills between musical genres; the concept of versatility and transferable skills may thus be an important part of an alternative

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                  Prof. Graham Welch

discourse relating to ideal musicianship amongst those who are students within multi-genre communities of practice (higher education sites encompassing more than one musical genre).

The findings thus point to a continuing dominant discourse that encompasses notions of talent, creativity and performance expertise. However, facets of personality as well as musical versatility were also found to be embedded in concepts of ideal musicians. Furthermore, these findings support the view that the musical ideals held by advanced performers (in classical and other Western music genres) are perhaps malleable, focusing early on in professional development more on musical versatility, and latterly (as performers gain in maturity and experience) more on self-reflective skills.

## **Conclusion**

The evidence presented here would suggest that concepts of innate talent and creativity that underpin performance expertise persist at the heart of contemporary discourse relating to ideal musicians in the Western music tradition. The dominant discourse relating to ideal musicians does not thus appear to have significantly altered since Robert Schumann positioned the ideal musician as a performer with music in his fingers, head and heart (Schumann, 1849, cited in Lowinsky, 1964). However, a broader discourse, privileging the role of personality and the value of musical versatility is now evident. While this is not a wholly alternative discourse, it does add depth and scope to the concepts of ideal musicians that have previously been expounded.

This study contributes to an understanding of contemporary representations of musical ideals that may frame musicians' aspirations and engagement with music. The

Authors        Dr Andrea Creech (corresponding author)  
                  Dr Ioulia Papageorgi  
                  Prof. Graham Welch

qualitative research presented here is limited by a relatively small sample size, but points to the need for further research on a larger scale that investigates the concepts of ideal musicians and how these concepts are related to aspiring musicians' aspirations, learning and performance strategies and self-efficacy in music. Contemporary accounts of ideal musicians may also be a powerful yet tacit influence in higher education music curricula, assessment strategies and funding policies for music organisations. Further research is needed that will explore how current discourse relating to concepts of ideal musicians may be operationalized in these contexts. This research is also limited by the nature of the sample, which includes only musicians from the Western music tradition. Within a multi-cultural society that subscribes to the principle of inclusiveness it is important that future research explores concepts of ideal musicians constructed by musicians representing diverse world musics. While one discourse relating to what it means to be an ideal musician has been put forth in this paper, the concept remains both elusive and open to debate.

Authors        Dr Andrea Creech (corresponding author)  
                  Dr Ioulia Papageorgi  
                  Prof. Graham Welch

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