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# *I Sing, Therefore I Am*

A DISCURSIVE INVESTIGATION OF  
WORK, PERFORMANCE AND IDENTITY

A DOCTORAL THESIS OF:  
The University of Adelaide  
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## *Abstract*

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This thesis presents analyses of musicians' talk about their experiences of musical performance. Drawing on a framework of discursive social psychology and an eclectic approach to discourse analysis (Wetherell, 1998), attention is paid to the ways in which musicians' accounts of performance work up particular identities for the musical performer, and to the possible functions and implications of these identity constructions.

Two introductory chapters outline the theory and methodology driving the analysis of musicians' talk. Traditional psychological research on the musician is compared with a discursive approach to examining identities, which is concerned with the flexible and situated use of identities in talk to accomplish social actions. The chapters also outline the eclectic approach to discourse analysis (Wetherell, 1998) drawn upon to analyse the collected accounts. This eclectic approach focuses on the local pragmatics of specific conversational contexts, as well as on the use of more global patterns of sense-making. It also considers the implications of talk for possible ways-of-being.

Four analytic chapters are concerned with three separate sets of data: first, a set of semi-structured interviews with solo musicians about their reasons for embarking on a career

in musical performance; second, a set of unstructured interviews with solo singers about their experiences of musical performance; and third, a 'future directions' meeting held by members of a leading Australian chamber choir. The analyses explore the flexible ways in which the participants drew on broad, historically situated notions of work, identity, choice, self-expression and self-fulfilment in order to achieve local actions in specific settings of talk. The following analytic findings are discussed:

1. Speakers worked up seemingly opposing constructions of identity for the performer depending on the local context of the talk and the discursive business at hand. Examples include the positioning of performers as both choosing to perform and as having little choice in the taking up of a performing career; and as both 'focusing on' and 'letting go' of themselves in a performance.
2. Participants regularly drew on contrast structures and an 'either/or' organisation of talk to construct musical performance as fulfilling but inherently financially unstable, and 'other' forms of work as financially stable but necessarily unfulfilling.
3. In the context of a group discussion, the construction of identities functioned to prescribe and police 'authentic group membership', and to work up a group decision regarding the payment of choristers.

In the final chapter of the thesis, the findings are discussed in terms of their implications for music psychology, discursive psychology, and for musicians in general.