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International Journal of Music Education

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Journal:	<i>International Journal of Music Education</i>
Manuscript ID	IJME-RS-20-0025.R2
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	Conservatoires, Soloists, Virtuosi, Career aspirations, Music in Higher Education
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# Classical soloists' life histories and the music conservatoire

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## Abstract

*This article explores the life histories of virtuoso classical music soloists with particular reference to conservatoire provision. Detailed life history interviews were conducted with six virtuosos between May 2018 and January 2019. These participants were three singers, two cellists and a concert pianist. Resultant qualitative data were stored in an NVivo software database and understood through a process of analytic induction. Key findings spotlight the significance of Higher Education, a connection between broad creative and cultural interest and musical excellence, and a significant role for conservatoires in diversifying their training and easing transition into the career. The soloists also warned of dangers relating to controlling teachers, loss of autonomy, and a need to convey their career realities to students.*

**Keywords:** Conservatoires, soloists, virtuosos, career aspirations, music in Higher Education

## BACKGROUND

Music conservatoires worldwide enrol students who have predominantly learned according to the theoretical logic, pedagogies, assessment practices, values and thus hierarchical relationships of European classical traditions. Examples of such hierarchies are the “master and apprentice” within instrumental or vocal teaching and learning, “the conductor vis-à-vis the orchestral musician” and “elite soloists” as significant role models. These have been part of many musical learners' lives for a considerable time before arriving at the conservatoire. Conservatoires celebrate their connections with elite performers in their marketing and narratives in order to attract students, and share in the reification of the soloist career as the most successful outcome of their training, modelling their assessment practices on it. Inevitably, some students commit to this end, but very few realize that goal. However, the views of those seen as being at the pinnacle of the profession are rarely heard in the literature on higher music education, and this article seeks to give voice to those who experience the realities of this career in order to inform the development of conservatoire pedagogies.

## Focus of the article

This study explores the life histories of six virtuoso music soloists with particular reference to their perspectives on conservatoire training. Biographical research typically takes a broad sweep, to take on board factors outside the interviewee's workplace, professional role or institution that impact on it, and here this includes themes of teachers, how the "realities" of the role might be conveyed to conservatoire students, the significance and functions of Higher Education (HE), the implications of their lives for institutional curricula, and so on. Our intention is not to reify the voices of these virtuosi, but to offer the lived experiences to inform practices within the sector, thus contributing to a dynamic discourse of change in higher music education (Bennett & Rowley, 2019).

## The conservatoire in the literature

Perkins (2013b) has noted that conservatoires are largely unresearched, whilst Jørgensen (2010) claims the wider higher music education research field has come of age yet institutions are generally unresponsive to research findings. Conservatoire practices have been described as opaque, unreflective and with heritages that no longer serve the majority of students (Bennett, 2007; Burwell et al., 2019; Carey & Grant, 2015; Gaunt, 2011; Ivaldi, 2016; Persson, 1996). Hierarchies and the fabric of institutions have been characterized as reifying teacher voice, with student performance prized above broader learning (Burwell et al., 2019; Ford, 2010; Perkins, 2013b) and as strongly protective of what they regard as their 'core' role against dilution (Duffy, 2016). The sector has also been criticized for narrow definitions of success (Perkins, 2013a) and the absence of "a critical and creative engagement with music" (Ford, 2010, p. 3; see also Leech-Wilkinson, 2018). Whilst there are currently successful networks and pilot projects that seek transformation (Duffy, 2016; Palmer, 2013; Perkins, 2013a), Rumiantsev et al. (2020) describe how conservatoire leaders are torn between the competing pulls of craftsmanship and employability and conclude that a "strong sense of urgency" (p. 39) is required in implementing curricular and pedagogical change.

It is clear that performance teachers dominate students' experiences through one-to-one lessons, but offer multiple conceptions of quality (Carey & Grant, 2015; Carey et al., 2013; Gaunt, 2011; Kingsbury, 2001). Gaunt (2011) observes that students see these teachers as the

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3 most significant component in determining the value of their studies, yet studio interactions  
4 are not well understood, with lessons being a “secret garden” (Burwell, 2005; Burwell et al.,  
5 2019; Carey & Grant, 2015). This secrecy, along with many staff lacking pedagogical  
6 training (Presland, 2005; Purser, 2005), and exhibiting a strong sense of professional  
7 autonomy (Rumiantsev et al., 2020) and a stated lack of community and sharing (Carey et al.,  
8 2013; Gaunt, 2008), breeds inconsistency. Some claim this leads to a focus on content  
9 transfer rather than on transformative, creative approaches (Carey et al., 2013; Leech-  
10 Wilkinson, 2018; Minors et al., 2017). Burwell (2020) however argues that the benefits of  
11 authoritative discourse in the studio lesson have not yet been fully understood.  
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21 There is a large body of literature on the development of elite soloists, from the early work of  
22 Lauren Sosniak through to recent volumes such as McPherson’s (2016) edited volume on  
23 Musical Prodigies and Izabela Wagner’s (2015) remarkable account of the lives of talented  
24 young virtuosi as they compete for a secure place in agents’ books. However, there is no  
25 research into the lived experiences of those who already regularly have their images on the  
26 posters of the major concert halls of the world, or of how conservatoires contribute to their  
27 success, making this an important study for the sector.  
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## 34 **METHODOLOGY**

### 35 **Life histories in social research**

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38 Data were collected in this study through life history interviews (Baker, 2005a, b, 2006,  
39 2014; Baker & Green, 2017, 2018; Clausen, 1998; Faraday & Plummer, 2003; Sikes et al.,  
40 1996; Sparkes, 1994). Life history research emerged between the two World Wars (for  
41 example, Thomas & Znaniecki, 1927). As a sociological method, it was initially used to  
42 understand the disenfranchised, deviant, marginalized or overlooked in society (for example,  
43 see Shaw, 1930; Lewis, 1961). Biographical strategies have also raised awareness of  
44 marginalized teachers “...by articulating the teacher’s voice and ensuring that this voice is  
45 heard loudly within the world of teacher development...” (Sparkes, 1994, p. 13). Educators’  
46 occupational phases have been another application of the method (Baker, 2005a, 2005b,  
47 2006; Huberman, 1993; Morgan, 1998; Sikes, 1985). Life histories can produce research  
48 findings “...from the perspective of an insider looking around, and not that of an outsider  
49 looking in” (Muchmore, 2000, p. 1). The open nature of interviews, co-construction and  
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3 collaboration these entail equalize the researcher-respondent power dynamic present in other  
4 forms of research. A biographical turn in sociology has also meant that individuals are seen  
5 as having agency whereby “biographies make society and are not merely made by it” (Rustin,  
6 2000, p. 46).  
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### 10 11 12 **The soloists in our study** 13

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15 For the purposes of our research, we define classical music “soloists” as those who:  
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- 18 • are full-time professional musicians
- 19 • belong to a small minority of elite performers within the classical music industry
- 20 • have a significant role playing concerti in front of professional orchestras, or singing lead  
21 operatic roles
- 22 • have an international reputation, as evidenced by being invited to travel to major concert  
23 venues worldwide to give paid live performances
- 24 • have recorded music with major labels
- 25 • have performing careers significant enough to need to be managed by an agent  
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29 We do not define “soloist” as someone with prodigiousness, i.e. with early recognition of  
30 musical “specialness” in childhood, as this study evidenced this not always to be the case.  
31 Our interviewees comprised: three singers, one male (Edvard), two females (Rebecca and  
32 Amahle); two cellists, one male (Pierre), one female (Esther); and a female pianist (Fiona)  
33 (pseudonyms are used throughout). Three had attended HE in North America, the rest in  
34 European countries; two had studied at university, one for an undergraduate degree other than  
35 music although both were involved in the conservatoire system for instrumental lessons  
36 during or before HE studies. One regularly teaches in the conservatoire system, the other five  
37 give masterclasses. They were all living in various European countries, except one who  
38 resided in a large US city, all with worldwide travel for their work.  
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### 48 **The life history interviews** 49

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51 Life history interviews were conducted with the six notable soloists. The audio-recorded  
52 sessions occurred from May 2018 to January 2019 inclusive, lasting between 45 minutes and  
53 2 hours 14 minutes. Skype was mainly used due to the participants living or being engaged in  
54 work internationally, with one discussion at the interviewee’s London flat. Semi-structured  
55 biographical interviewing was adopted since we wanted latitude for participants to raise  
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3 themes of personal importance rather than these coming only from scant literature on what is  
4 a relatively inaccessible social group (see, for example, Bloom, 1985; Simonton, 1997;  
5 Sosniak, 1985a, 1985b, 1990). It is the nature of life-history interviews to not define specific  
6 research questions but rather to let the themes inductively emerge from the data analysis.  
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10 Discussions ranged over a wide subject area and this article looks just at data themes related  
11 to teachers, experiences of higher music education and suggestions for conservatoire training  
12 programmes. The researchers' implicit questions in seeking data on these themes were:  
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- 17 • What might the life histories of elite soloists tell us about the forms of training needed to  
18 create and sustain such a career?
- 19 • To better support aspirant soloists, what changes should conservatoires be making, if any?
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22 Transcribed interviews were returned to respondents for verification and review, and further  
23 e-mail exchanges fed into our database.  
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### 26 27 **Data analysis**

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30 Data from the interviews were transcribed verbatim by a Research Officer and stored in an  
31 NVivo software database for coding and analysis. Advantages of software use were  
32 comprehensiveness (Kelle, 2004), speed (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) and support for analytic  
33 strategies difficult with manual methods (Lee & Fielding, 2004). Software assisted with the  
34 storage, coding, and retrieval of the qualitative data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Jagielo, 1998;  
35 Patton, 2002; Tesch, 1990; Weitzman, 2000).  
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43 The strategy employed was “analytic induction” (AI) (see Baker, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2014;  
44 Baker & Green, 2017, 2018; Bernard et al., 2017; Cressey, 1950, 1953; Manning, 1971,  
45 1982; Robinson, 1951; Zeoli et al., 2013). Following transcription of the first interview,  
46 codes marking broad concepts were applied to the textual data before exploring the text  
47 associated with them to define subcategories. Follow-up e-mail exchanges were opportunities  
48 to evaluate the emergent theory, for “respondent validation” (Delamont, 1992), and for  
49 “negative or deviant case analysis” (Emigh, 1997). As Bernard et al. (2017) have remarked,  
50 where parts of one’s theory are not supported by respondents “...you have two choices:  
51 Modify the theory or redefine the phenomenon you’re trying to explain” (p. 338). Where  
52 contradictions occurred in newly-collected data and e-mail feedback, our codes were  
53 amended before, again, seeking confirmation of their viability from respondents. We quickly  
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3 reached a point of “theoretical saturation” (Bertaux, 1981; Tagg, 1985) whereby the  
4 interviewees were satisfied our depiction was “authentic” of their lives and perspectives  
5 (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, and Seale, 1999a, 1999b, 2002). Researchers who “...privilege  
6 ‘experience’ as ‘authentic’...” will take findings back to respondents to confirm these  
7 resonate with them (Silverman, 2001, p. 235).  
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### 13 **Ethics**

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17 The research underwent ethical review procedures at University College London (Ref. REC  
18 1044, Z6364106/2018/02/95) and Trinity Laban gaining approval from both institutions in  
19 February 2018. It adhered to ethical standards of the British Educational Research  
20 Association (2011, 2018) and British Psychological Society (2009, 2018).  
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### 26 ***Recruitment and informed consent***

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29 The Director of a professional London orchestra was known to one of the researchers. He or  
30 she forwarded an information letter to the soloists via their agents. The soloists were working  
31 with the orchestra whilst they were resident at a major international music festival. Soloists  
32 are relatively inaccessible musicians, with contact normally through agents who supervise  
33 their time and work closely to manage their public image. So, an established, trusted point of  
34 contact was essential. Our letter included information on the project, its aims and ethics,  
35 made clear that participation was voluntary, that interviewees could withdraw at any point,  
36 and that any further questions would be answered. It requested that the soloists contacted the  
37 researchers by e-mail if they were interested in participating. By arranging an interview, the  
38 soloists gave their informed consent. The soloists were reminded of the ethical arrangements  
39 at the start of interviews.  
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### 50 ***Anonymity***

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53 The soloists were given pseudonyms reflecting their cultural heritage, with other identifying  
54 information removed on making the transcriptions. It should be noted that these soloists  
55 belonged to a small, unique group of musicians worldwide and, even with such adaptations  
56 there is a slight risk of disclosure in reporting lives. We made this clear to the participants,  
57 but we also returned transcripts to them asking that they identified any potential threats to  
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their anonymity or, indeed, sensitive matters not to be reported. This process also assured the accuracy of accounts, their faithfulness and “internal consistency” (Atkinson, 1998, 2001).

### ***Data security and storage***

The project audio files were kept on secure, password-protected online storage. Once transferred, any audio was erased from the researchers’ memory cards. The researchers’ NVivo software database was also kept within the security measures of University College London and Trinity Laban.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

<b>Themes</b>
HE as a “rite of passage”
Learning and performance
Institutions as “agencies”
Control and autonomy
The conservatoire-industry relationship <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Career bridging</li> <li>- A classical music “bubble”</li> </ul>
Breadth of interests and study
Conveying the realities of the soloist profession <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Popular narratives</li> <li>- Personal life</li> </ul>
Suggestions for conservatoire curricula

*Table 1: Emergent themes and sub-themes*

The presentation of themes (see Table 1) is here offered with contextualisation from the literature where it exists, but with relatively lengthy quotations in order to permit the respondent voices space to fully reveal the issues, and to flatten the researcher-respondent power differential.

### **Higher Education as a “rite of passage”**

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3 The six soloists had all been students in HE, although one did not study music. All three  
4 singers additionally attended opera schools. They all considered HE a necessary “rite of  
5 passage”, although not without obstacles in some cases. Pianist Fiona was able to fast track  
6 her university education to pave the way for her career. She explained:  
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11 I was only in high school for three years and I did Grade 9 to 12 in three years and, then, they  
12 allowed me into Piano Performance at the university after Grade 12. So, I got out of high  
13 school when I was 15 [years old], which was really quite young. I did some summer courses  
14 too to sort of make up the time. When I was 15, I took a year of Piano Performance at the  
15 university with this French teacher I just discovered, as a special student, so I gained a year  
16 there and, then, I had credit for the [Canadian university, name removed for purposes of  
17 anonymity] for some courses. I did a four-year university course in three years, and I got to  
18 finish university at 18 which is usually when most people start at a university. (Fiona, pianist)  
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22 For others on a more typical timeline, it was a matter of juggling high-profile performance  
23 work with studies in HE, with some significant personal sacrifice too. Esther recollected:  
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27 I entered high school in 1996 so e-mail was around so I e-mailed a lot of the assignments and,  
28 of course, you know this multiplied exponentially. For university, I was in a very rigorous  
29 curriculum there. When I toured Japan for a year, I think I emailed six papers, did plenty of  
30 assignments. I used the plane rides to do my academic work. At the end of my senior year, I  
31 was playing my first Barber concerto. ...I hadn't played it much, and it's quite challenging. It  
32 was the week before finals, so of course all of the assignments were due. So, I used to go  
33 from this, to this, you know, just typing [laughs]... There were four concerts that week. There  
34 was Thursday at 8 o'clock. I played the concert then went straight back to my hotel room and  
35 busted out a 15-page paper [for] the next morning. I went to bed at 5 o'clock and woke up  
36 four hours later. You took a shower, [and] got back on stage to play the 11 o'clock matinee,  
37 took a nap, [and] played the concert that night. [Then I] ...busted out another paper  
38 [laughs]... So, I didn't really sleep during those four years. (Esther, cellist)  
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42 Esther's degree was not in music, and clearly did not need to do it to achieve her very  
43 successful music career, but, nonetheless, she did so. She reflected:  
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47 I had a very strong music background and was surrounded by musicians my whole life. I kind  
48 of wanted to be surrounded by other people [laughs]. People who are studying different fields  
49 with varying interests so wanted to take classes in many different subjects. When I had to pick  
50 a major, I wanted history because I love the Russian literature and music, so I focused on  
51 Russia and Eastern Europe. (Esther, cellist)  
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54 All of these musicians considered HE a necessary and valuable step therefore. However, at  
55 times they questioned its usefulness to their future careers, and/or they remarked on the  
56 manner in which engagement in it entailed sacrifice. This suggests the value of a degree to  
57 them and their families as important “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1993) representing social  
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3 status. Perhaps, this is also suggestive of the ongoing class-related nature of classical music  
4 (Bull, 2019). In their choices and privileging Higher Education despite already being on  
5 trajectories towards a solo career, these artists embody the value argued for a degree as a  
6 developer of wider skills and attitudes such as critical thinking, creativity, communication,  
7 collaboration and independence (The British Academy, 2017, 2020).  
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### 15 **Learning and performance**

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19 The soloists felt that conservatoires offered many valuable, high-quality performance  
20 opportunities, for example in solo, chamber and orchestral settings, and a useful breadth of  
21 performance activities, such as choirs and accompaniment. This was helpful both because of  
22 the opportunities to experience the physicality of performance but also for the experiences of  
23 working with outstanding professionals:  
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28 If people are standing in a rehearsal room in the conservatory, singing [an] opera aria, it's  
29 very, very different from singing opera aria when you're standing on a stage. (Edvard, singer)

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31 If there were important moments, it was very often when I worked with somebody who was  
32 very, very good, you know... That's inspiring. When we did a project and... a real conductor  
33 showed up and worked with us. That really made a difference. (Edvard, singer)  
34

35 This element of performance training is perceived as essential and part of the unique offer of  
36 the conservatoire; it is a "central and dominant facet of conservatoire life" (Perkins, 2013b,  
37 p.204) but there are researchers who argue that institutions weight the aesthetics of  
38 performance too strongly. Turner (2004), for example, claims that the conservatoire's  
39 dominant ideology and value system is performance rather than learning (also see Carey,  
40 2010; and Ford, 2010) whilst López-Íñiguez and Bennett (2020) evidence that musicians who  
41 privilege learning over performance are more likely to thrive in the long-term. This connects  
42 with the product-process debate suggesting conservatoires as sites of behaviourist principles  
43 (Carey et al., 2013) generating competitive environments and unequal opportunities (Perkins  
44 2013b). This was lamented by our respondents, with one voicing:  
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54 Sometimes I hear from young students now who... comment on the competitiveness of it  
55 and you know the stress of it and I don't think that's really a productive thing. (Fiona,  
56 pianist)  
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58 Fiona's concerns are backed up by the evidence that conservatoire students have high levels  
59 of stress and insufficient mechanisms for coping with them (Araujo et al., 2017, Matei et al.,  
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3 2018). Nonetheless, performance opportunities were considered a valued central feature of  
4 conservatoire training by our respondents.  
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### 8 **Institutions as “agencies”** 9

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11 Many students come to the conservatoire or music department because they are attracted by  
12 the prospect of learning from a specific esteemed professional performer (Burt & Mills, 2006;  
13 Hanken, 2016) as exemplified by Fiona:  
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18 I went to the Department of Music [at the Canadian university, name removed for purposes of  
19 anonymity] for my bachelor in music piano performance because [instrumental teacher’s  
20 name removed] was there. I didn’t go for any other reason. [It was] because I wanted to study  
21 with him. (Fiona, pianist)  
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25 Our interviews were rich in accounts of the soloists as students identifying excellent key  
26 teachers and moving to their hosting institutions, often crossing continents to do so. This  
27 raises a question about what students consider more important to them: “the institution” or  
28 “the teacher”? If it is the latter, conservatoires run the risk of acting as an “agency”,  
29 facilitating access to these esteemed performers rather than with formally-trained HE  
30 teachers, i.e. with institutional worth heavily vested in migrant, hourly-paid and often  
31 pedagogically untrained staff members (Daniel & Parkes, 2017; Duffy, 2016; Perkins, 2013a;  
32 Purser, 2005; Simones, 2017). The “draw” of individual staff profiles for prospective students  
33 may occur in relation to any type of HE course. However, conservatoires are relative outliers  
34 as places often chosen *primarily* due to the activities of staff members *outside* the institution.  
35 Instead, most HE students opt for programmes of study because of location, institutional  
36 reputation, and teaching quality (Briggs, 2007; Roga et al., 2015). So, unless “agency”  
37 thinking and institutional hierarchies can somehow shift, the formal training and professional  
38 accreditation of staff delivering the core conservatoire experience “as educators” will always  
39 be a challenging endeavour for those wishing to enact change (Daniel & Parkes, 2017, 2019;  
40 Gaunt & Papageorgi, 2010; Purser, 2005; Simones, 2017). It is important to flag that this  
41 notion of “agency” is often in the minds of students prior to enrolment; it is what attracts  
42 them to the institution in the first place and it is often also in the minds of the teacher  
43 (Rumiantsev, 2020). However, whilst Lehmann et al. (2007) and Persson (1996) evidence  
44 that trained conservatoire teachers are the most effective, Arnove (2010) finds that  
45 extraordinary teachers need a high level of knowledge and experience in their subject field,  
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3 making this a challenging problem for the sector. Fiona sums it up, presenting a tolerance for  
4 poor teaching and potentially even bullying, if the teacher displays outstanding performance  
5 skills:  
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10 I think it so much will depend on the two personalities. I know that as a teenager I would not  
11 have responded well to being bullied, and I would not have responded well to being made to  
12 feel really small and inadequate. But, once somebody who could really do the thing that I  
13 wished to do was prepared to show me how, that's an entirely different matter. (Fiona,  
14 pianist)  
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17 Clearly the complex relationship between performance and teaching skills also involve  
18 ethical considerations of student wellbeing and autonomy.  
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## 20 21 22 **Control and autonomy** 23

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26 Fiona here introduced a connection between high-profile teachers and bullying. Some of the  
27 soloists noted that there could be a tendency for teachers or institutions to control repertoire  
28 they studied, external performance opportunities, and their career moves. Yet student  
29 autonomy and personalization have been argued as essential in conservatoires (Gaunt &  
30 Papageorgi, 2010). For singers, in particular, there were notions of the “voice maturing” and  
31 “readiness” for specific roles, repertoire and other activities to which not all subscribed.  
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33 Rebecca, for example, noted high value in her early experiences with an opera company  
34 alongside the initial tendency of her conservatoire to limit her participation:  
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41 Oh, I think that it's very important [to be permitted to participate in professional productions]  
42 and, actually, it would be great if there was more of it... I left college early and there was,  
43 right at the very beginning, a bit of “No, your allegiance is with us so you should stay here”. I  
44 said “Well, I'm getting work at ENO [English National Opera]”. My teacher thought that I  
45 was ready to do it. Actually, then they were very supportive and they let me leave, so I did  
46 four years undergraduate and, then, I started the Opera School. I did a year there and started  
47 getting work at ENO while I was there, and they allowed me to leave. ... They were  
48 supportive of it, and that was really a wonderful thing because you can go and have a career  
49 and if they're hindering it in any way, it's terrible. (Rebecca, singer)  
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52 Note even here the rather un-agentic notion that it is the institution that “lets” and “allows”  
53 Rebecca to leave. Edvard thought that one reason for his career success was saying “yes” to a  
54 broad variety of musical opportunities across his life. He further added that, within the early  
55 career, the notion of a “guru” teacher was detrimental. He commented:  
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3 If the teacher becomes a kind of “guru”, I don’t think that’s a good thing [laughs]. ... I can  
4 remember colleagues who were very, very dependent on their coaches or their teachers. They  
5 didn’t do anything without having the get go from this “guru” of theirs. I mean, when they’re  
6 young and it’s nice to have somebody they can ask, and to have somebody they trust. But you  
7 have to develop a sense of what’s right or wrong. [You have to] develop that yourself.  
8 Because, if you’re going to live through this, you’re going to do it through many years, and  
9 you’re going to... do things in a different way depending on how you develop and how the  
10 world around you develops. [You need to decide] where you’re going to work, with whom  
11 you’re going to work [laughs]. (Edvard, singer)  
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14 The notion of a “guru” teacher was elided by one respondent with the word “bully” (see  
15 Carter, 2011 and MacArthur, 2011 for evidence of this in music learning). Amahle was also  
16 sceptical of teachers who controlled students’ career choices for purposes of their “legacy”:  
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20  
21 I think that it is important to make the choices *you* want. [These are choices about] what kind  
22 of career you want, what kind of job you want, or what kind of artist you want to be. ... I  
23 understand the point of teachers who kind of build themselves little fiefdoms of singers.  
24 That’s them wanting to leave legacy. I’ve got respect for wanting to leave legacy but I feel  
25 that legacy isn’t created by you [i.e. the teacher] forcing people to go a certain way. A legacy  
26 is the choices your students make, the career that they choose to build. (Amahle, singer)  
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29 Amahle mentions the personal legacy of the teacher, but Perkins (2013b) notes that the  
30 marketing of institutions is also bound up in celebrating their student achievements as  
31 soloists.  
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36 None of this is to say that the respondents did not value close relationship with teachers or  
37 their involvement with them as individuals rather than just as learners, and they spoke  
38 warmly about particularly influential figures and those who introduced them to broader  
39 artistic concepts. This was, however, almost always infused with language of agency and  
40 self-direction.  
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## 46 **The conservatoire-industry relationship**

### 47 ***Career bridging***

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50 The soloists valued relationships held between conservatoires and the music industry. They  
51 considered institutions to have a significant “career bridging” role. Thus, they were important  
52 sites for accruing industry connections, developing networks and gaining opportunities for  
53 personal development though exposure to the realities of the workplace (Creech et al., 2008;  
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3 Minors et al., 2017). As an example, Rebecca participated in the English National Opera's  
4 Young Singers programme (also see above), which gave her the chance to "learn the job" as  
5 opposed to participating in competitions, which she stated were "soul destroying". Edvard  
6 remarked:  
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11 I would somehow make sure that people got something outside their rehearsal rooms. I think I  
12 would associate conservatories and the symphony orchestras in a city. I think it's really  
13 important, if you are in an opera school...[or]...in opera studio, that you get on stage and try  
14 it out instead of living in a protected environment. (Edvard, singer)  
15  
16

17 Some of the soloists in this study experienced the professional music world at a young age,  
18 either through family connections or through a cathedral choir, but one particularly recounted  
19 the instructive experience of assisting on a recording session aged eleven or twelve:  
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23  
24 I don't even remember what exactly they recorded...and very silently but as exotic as it may  
25 sound, for four days I was plunged into the recording process and the hard work and what  
26 kind of concentration it needs and all this thing. So that I think in a way it was instructive.  
27 (Pierre, cellist)  
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30 Reid et al. (2019) emphasise the importance of professional placements for the development  
31 of students' contextual knowledge, skill-benchmarking and motivation, whilst Lucas et al.  
32 (2009) remind us that the authenticity of the experience needs to be upheld. Indeed,  
33 placements are a common feature of an increasingly employment-focussed sector, with the  
34 Association of European Conservatoires publishing a handbook of placement learning in  
35 2010 (Longo, 2010). There are questions remaining in the sector about the core or additional  
36 nature of placement learning and its assessment, but such situated learning experiences  
37 additionally offer valuable curriculum feedback for staff (Bartleet et al., 2019).  
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### 47 *A classical music "bubble"*

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50 However, one interviewee troubled this proposition by eliding "the conservatoire" and "the  
51 classical music industry": when asked what she would change in the conservatoire sector she  
52 replied: "It's a very big question, it's like literally: how would you change the world of  
53 classical [music]" (Amahle, singer). This is an example of Ford's (2010) argument that  
54 conservatoires are an institutionalization of the discourse of classical music. This "bubble"  
55 was thought to be at odds with the realities of a much more diverse industry for which our  
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3 respondents thought preparation was absolutely vital, and a closed cycle of conservatoire and  
4 elite industry voices was considered unhelpful. Beyond curricula issues, programmes also  
5 need to permit students the opportunities to challenge the contextual norms in which they  
6 operate and the assumptions underpinning their education (Broad & Duffy, 2014; Leech-  
7 Wilkinson, 2020).  
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### 13 **Breadth of interests and study**

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17 A noteworthy surprise was the wide array of ventures in the soloists' careers and lives, which  
18 spanned many creative musical activities, composing, improvising, entrepreneurship, charity  
19 work and social enterprise, teaching, and furthermore engagement in various musical genres.  
20 For example, in our interviews concert pianist Fiona noted her interest in social development  
21 through music. She had been an ambassador for an organization working with inner-city  
22 children for several years., but also founded and directs a well-known music festival. Pierre  
23 (cello) likewise also maintained a conservatoire teaching post and the artistic direction of a  
24 festival, membership of a successful improvising ensemble and the commissioning of much  
25 new music.  
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34 Prior to the investigation, we had the misconception that the soloists would be highly  
35 focussed on their instrumental discipline *only* within the remit of practising and performing  
36 classical music. Moreover, we anticipated this would be from an early point in their lives.  
37 Accordingly, they would have marginalized, or neglected to some extent, broader learning  
38 (musical and non-musical) both within formal and informal learning environments, as  
39 described by Wagner (2015). However, our experience was otherwise: these were intelligent,  
40 knowledgeable people with very broad interests. Our respondents emphasized the great value  
41 of lifelong learning within and beyond music. The reasons they gave included needing  
42 breadth as a person to drive performance creativity and also combating social isolation  
43 experienced due to extensive travel.  
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54 I feel so grateful that I had the education that I did. ... [US conservatoire, name withheld] has  
55 a relationship with [US Ivy League university, real name withheld] so this is an option for  
56 students to take classes there. {Another US conservatoire} also has a programme where you  
57 can get a music degree and you can take one class at [US university] per semester. I just  
58 decided to do it the other way around because I wanted to get a full degree. ...I used to make  
59 a joke about "the dumb, isolated musician" who doesn't do anything else in life and doesn't  
60 have a well-rounded... I thought, even when I was 13 [or] 14 [years old], I don't want to be a

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3 dumb isolated musician. I want to learn about things; I want to read. Almost every musician I  
4 know is super curious and intelligent and wants to learn about the world and where we are. I  
5 think it really informs the music making. I don't think anybody would disagree with that...  
6 And so it's really important for music education, for the education of the musician. (Esther,  
7 cellist)  
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10 Esther coupled her broad interests with her educational choices, a view also expressed by  
11 Pierre:

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13 What I observed more and more... [as] a teacher and everything, is that the more complete  
14 your education will be also your musical education. (Pierre, cellist)  
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16  
17 Despite their high-profile performance careers, for these individuals the portfolio career was  
18 clearly a preferred choice for personal and artistic reasons rather than a watering down of  
19 some high artistic “calling”, a situation also found by López-Íñiguez and Bennett (2020) who  
20 stress the “intrinsic and process-oriented” nature of soloist careers (p. 9). Perhaps for  
21 conservatoires this underscores the need for a broad vision of training and “the music career”,  
22 one that engages students in diverse, creative endeavours and exposure well beyond classical  
23 music performance. Burt-Perkins and Mills (2009) argue that “breadth – as opposed to only  
24 depth – may be key to developing our knowledge of musical expertise” (p. 831). Papageorgi  
25 et al. (2010) likewise have argued that music in HE “should encourage a broad conception of  
26 what constitutes a musician and stress the benefits of balancing academic and performance  
27 work” (p. 443). Burnard and Haddon (2015) have remarked that entrepreneurial creativities  
28 will likely be the driving force for institutional change and industry alignment, and more  
29 recently, Bartleet et al., (2019) add the additional dimensions of mobility, digitisation, gender  
30 parity and health and wellbeing as facilitating musical careers.  
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### 42 **Conveying the realities of the soloist's profession**

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46 Against a backdrop of marketing that glamourized their lives with notable performances,  
47 prizes, recordings and other accolades, the soloists considered there to be a lack of awareness  
48 in music students about the realities of their careers, particularly the substantial travel,  
49 isolation and sacrifice in their personal lives.  
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### 53 ***Popular narratives***

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58 Amahle pointed to the disconnect between popular narratives of the profession and the lived  
59 experience:  
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5 Especially when you're starting out in the career, you don't have access to all this information  
6 which is why I'd rather have, instead of a singer giving me a masterclass telling me how to  
7 sing an aria, I rather have a singer sit down with me and tell me the real deal. Tell me all the  
8 nitty gritty about how they got to where they are. Tell me about the long hard nights of  
9 practising. Tell me about the times they had to skip out on dinner with family and friends.  
10 Tell me about the weddings and christenings that they missed. ...Everyday isn't sitting and  
11 waiting for Vogue magazine to do a story about you or Opera News to call you the next "it-  
12 girl" of opera. Everyday day is drinking your throat-coat tea, trying to remain as silent as  
13 possible, because you've got an audition the next day. All the while you're busy trying to pay  
14 your taxes, learn a new role, make sure that your arias are all packed, finding an outfit that  
15 fits. ...The lives that are described in media and in books are not the lives that... Well [they  
16 are] not the life I'm living that's for sure [laughs]. (Amahle, singer)  
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19 She went on to discuss the unpredictability of a singer's career, which often starts late as the  
20 voice matures, and the patterns of marketing in classical music. She remarked:  
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24 Our talent gets discovered later... The way marketing works [is that] people use their beauty  
25 and overnight success is...the trajectory that you're supposed to hit. ...Thanks to marketing  
26 gurus, [that is] what a stellar career should look like. The narrative has key words: fast-rising,  
27 young and talented, all those things that have to do with youth and prowess. ...It is very rare  
28 to hear narratives of "after a lot of hard work and plodding and a bit of a humdrum life, this  
29 person finally got to step on that stage." That's a very boring story [laughter]. But the  
30 problem is that that *is* the story. (Amahle, singer)  
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33 Amahle's comments resonate with Wagner's (2015) assertion that despite the public image of  
34 prodigy and genius, "soloists achieve their elite status after a long trajectory" (p. 214).  
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### 37 38 39 *Personal life*

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42 The soloist's career required dedication to the art, and long practice routines and substantial  
43 travel impacted on personal life. Indeed, Wagner (2015) describes the highly sporadic nature  
44 of relationships for musicians at this level (p. 188). One respondent (name removed for  
45 purposes of anonymity) noted, for example, that he or she had recently agreed to move away  
46 from his or her spouse. It was a sensitive topic we chose not to pursue during the interview.  
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48 Themes were frequently raised relating to having children, their upbringing and regret about  
49 absence from families.  
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### 54 55 56 *Family choices*

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3 Rebecca thought the decision on whether or not to have children was highly significant. She  
4  
5 also noted pressure from agents. Rebecca remarked:

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8 ...you know especially as a woman having children. I don't have any children but I hope to  
9 and it's something that comes up a lot but certainly with agents: "Are you going to have  
10 children?" You know it's seen as a bad thing to do from their point of view. "How are you  
11 going to make it work?" and "Have you thought about it?" "Are you earning enough in order  
12 to pay for nannies?" "Are you happy with your children growing up and you being away?"  
13 All that sort of stuff. And now I'm starting to think "Well, do I want to be a singer for the rest  
14 of my life actually?" ...Because basically what I'm saying is now I'm at an age where, you  
15 know, I'm getting married, thinking about having children, and that sort of thing. The more  
16 I'm away, the harder I find it. (Rebecca, singer)

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19 When asked about relationships and children, Fiona simply dismissed the topic with the witty  
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21 remark, "I don't do any of that":

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24 I find it quite enough to get myself around the world and up at five in the morning, you know,  
25 to get an early flight and I'm glad I don't have to put anyone else through that ordeal. (Fiona,  
26 pianist)

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29 Esther seemed to have found a way to manage child-rearing. Her husband also worked in the  
30  
31 classical music industry. When she toured, he travelled with her to look after their child and  
32  
33 vice versa. Esther explained:

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36 This is a very, very rare week at home. I'm here with my daughter and my husband's coming  
37 back from a tour in a couple days, but then we're actually all going to London. The logistics  
38 can sometimes be a nightmare, and we have a two-year-old daughter. So, she's travelling with  
39 us. During her first year, she travelled with me. And now that she's a little bit older, we try to  
40 just make sure that she moves as little as possible so if I have a recital, for example, my  
41 husband is conducting a week of opera then she'll stay with him. It means that the family is  
42 actually together most of the time but we are home almost *none* of the time. I would rather  
43 that our family is together than one of us being home alone. ...So home is really where the  
44 family is. And that means that we kind of chase each other and our daughter is very, very  
45 well-travelled. By now, she's been to seventeen countries. (Esther, cellist)

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48 This was workable with a younger child before formal schooling, but Pierre looked back on  
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50 how travel had, ultimately, affected his time with his children with some regret. This was not  
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52 time that could be recovered he felt:

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55 ...it's a vocation; it's a passion and, because of that, it is a direct challenge to your private  
56 life, particularly with regard to the amount of personal involvement. So, this personal  
57 involvement is somehow something that you will not give to your children. There are certain  
58 ages with your children when they do miss you more...because you're on tour and because  
59 you're doing something which is incredibly central in your life. ... now my children are quite  
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3 grown up and I would take them with me on tour but they have their lives and everything. So,  
4 the fact is I was gone a lot. ...So, this is the negative aspect of the job. (Pierre, cellist)  
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### 6 *Friendships and isolation*

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10 Some of the soloists also noted how their working patterns affected their ability to build  
11 networks of friends. Friendships were troubled by available time and frequently travelling  
12 between countries for concerts with different orchestras. The latter often meant arriving in a  
13 city, unpacking in one's hotel room, rehearsing and performing with the orchestra, going to  
14 back to the hotel, and rapidly flying out to the next professional engagement. Edvard  
15 explained how he had "friends by proxy":  
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22 Sometimes not even, not really being able to have friends for many years. My life was just  
23 work and family. Really my wife's friends are my friends. [laughs]. (Edvard, singer)  
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### 28 **Suggestions for conservatoire curricula**

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31 A number of interviewees made further suggestions about conservatoire curricula. Rebecca  
32 posited enhancing the awareness of practical knowledge:  
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36 One thing that I never learnt about [at conservatoire] was tax and being self-employed and the  
37 money side of things. I had no idea that I should be paying tax after a certain amount of  
38 earnings, and, then, got fined because I hadn't been. [I didn't know about] things like VAT  
39 [UK Value Added Tax]. The same thing happened when I went over the threshold. I was  
40 fined and had to go back to orchestras and ask for VAT then. [There was] all that sort of stuff  
41 that I didn't even know. I knew nothing about it. That's something that could be really useful,  
42 also maybe, talking about agents and how to deal with agents. There was no talk about that  
43 when I was at college. (Rebecca, singer)  
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46 A number of soloists remarked on the value of chamber music training, not just for skill and  
47 repertoire development:  
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51 I speak really for string players and pianists, because this is really the world that I know  
52 better... I think the best conservatories put a very heavy emphasis on chamber music. With  
53 this, you really create strong friendships and musical friendships. I remember my favourite  
54 conservatory experience was with the quartet that I formed. (Esther, cellist)  
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57 Friendships is one known protective factor, perhaps another focus should be health and  
58 wellbeing. Amahle made this comment about her experiences at a US conservatoire:  
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4 If I had to run a conservatory like [US conservatoire, name removed for purposes of  
5 anonymity], I think I would definitely stress the mental and emotional aspect of the career,  
6 making sure that people are mentally and emotionally fit. (Amahle, singer)  
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9 In addition, there were comments about the value of learning to improvise, and whilst all  
10 performed comfortably from memory, this was reported as a self-learnt rather than taught  
11 skill, as was the management of performance anxiety.  
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## 18 REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

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21 We here examine what these rarely-heard soloists' views offer to the conservatoire sector. It  
22 first needs noting that our sample may be affected by the hiring practices of one orchestra  
23 director.  
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28 To summarise our findings, a first degree was clearly highly valued by these soloists and  
29 even those already on a soloist career path made considerable sacrifices to achieve one. In  
30 music, the main points of value were identified as being: the high quality of specific teachers  
31 in the sector and the access provided to them; performance experiences; the industry  
32 relationships those institutions had; support into careers; opportunities for chamber music and  
33 a significance in forming friendships. However, a non-musical undergraduate degree also had  
34 a significant cultural status for one of these musicians, representative of a fascination  
35 amongst our interviewees for a breadth of knowledge in the arts. Postgraduate study for  
36 instrumentalists held less value than for singers, though, as they were mostly already  
37 performing internationally by that age.  
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47 One-to-one teaching forms the core of the conservatoire experience, and it is tempting to  
48 blame insufficient time with a principal study instrumental teacher as the main inhibitor in  
49 producing outstanding musicians or soloists. Indeed, conservatoires are often compared on  
50 their provision of one-to-one hours. However, there is no research evidencing causation  
51 between those hours and success however it is defined. Behind this specious argument is a  
52 hegemonic view of music education as a matter of "banking" (Friere, 1996) knowledge in  
53 linear progression and that progress is more about teachers' actions than those of learners.  
54 There is also the question of student voice and agency, and the extent to which institutions  
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3 facilitate self-directed trajectories rather than disempowering learners through passive,  
4 monologic, goal-oriented, hierarchical pedagogies. It is interesting, therefore, that, although  
5 every respondent named and even sought out key teachers, none indicated contact time above  
6 the standard institutional offer, and the importance of agentic relationship was stressed.  
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8 Evidence also exists that students benefit from multiple voices in their principal study  
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10 (Haddon, 2011) and from a variety of one-to-one, masterclass and collaborative small group  
11  
12 learning opportunities (Bjøntegaard, 2015; Forbes, 2016).  
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17 It is possible, too, that the institution's role is historically over-stated, and that many  
18 contextual factors beyond its walls are also influential in supporting musicians into a soloist's  
19 career. Two of the instrumentalists were clearly on that trajectory by their mid-teenage years  
20 (with the situation different for the singers who required their voice to mature). There is,  
21 however a cyclical effect in that, paradoxically, we were told that the name of a prestigious  
22 institution was valuable for early-career soloists, and that conservatoires and individual  
23 teachers alike thrive on reputations as facilitators and enablers.  
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31 When conservatoires first offered degrees in partnership with universities (in the UK this was  
32 1992) it permitted the study of a range of liberal arts subjects as part of a performance degree.  
33 This remains at some institutions but is no longer a common part of the European  
34 conservatoire scene. Instead, modules in contextual studies tend to centre on music theory  
35 and history with a range of electives intended to support performance learning (Harrison et  
36 al., 2013). To permit students long hours of practice, performance modules are weighted  
37 heavily for credit, and the reading and writing demands of contextual modules are minimized.  
38  
39 The Association of European Conservatoires (AEC) current learning outcomes (2017) for the  
40 first qualification cycle exhibit a broader range of concerns than previous versions yet there  
41 still remains a very strong emphasis on technical and interpretative performance skills in this  
42 sector.  
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51 Our research raises a number of questions about this. Two of our participants elected for  
52 university study rather than the conservatoire despite their soloist's career trajectory at that  
53 age. This suggests that, when they were doing many hours of daily individual practice, there  
54 was a desire for breadth of knowledge beyond performance along with a commitment to  
55 make considerable sacrifices to achieve it. Furthermore, they believed that knowledge and  
56 experience informed musicianship.  
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5 This viewpoint sets a challenge for conservatoires regarding competing demands within  
6 curricula. In keeping with this, Duffy (2013) describes an increasing call for breadth in  
7 undergraduate performance study at her institution, but she also notes staff concerns about  
8 artistic standards and practice time. Clearly institutions walk a fine line in navigating national  
9 degree characteristics and preparation for the profession with artistic standards; what is novel  
10 in this study is evidence that those perceived to be at the pinnacle of the artistic career highly  
11 value broad artistic and entrepreneurial knowledge alongside the performance skills. Whereas  
12 Perkins evidences a “conflict between specialist and holistic conservatoire education”  
13 (2013b, p. 207) we suggest that these are, in fact, inextricably intertwined and that  
14 employability considerations align with, rather than compete against, artistic ones.  
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24 The life histories revealed that the soloist’s career came at significant personal cost, and the  
25 narratives presented to current students are, in our respondents’ view, not a full representation  
26 of this seemingly glamorous profession. Our participants expressed the need to communicate  
27 “the reality” such that students could make informed choices. Beyond this, Wagner (2015)  
28 has argued that failure to succeed as a soloist is perhaps the most significant risk of intensive  
29 musical training, observing that “teachers carefully hide the fact that success is rare, even  
30 nearly impossible” (p. 190). In her view, teachers and institutions have a vested interest in  
31 keeping student expectations high, hiding those who change teacher or drop out to maintain  
32 an illusion of high success rates, and that “this form of education could not exist without  
33 these unrealistic projections” (p. 190).  
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43 So, to what extent should ethical, reflective conservatoires reveal “the realities” and “career  
44 costs” to students, or give realistic analyses of a student’s chances of achieving a soloist’s  
45 career, and, indeed, will students be responsive? There are no straightforward answers,  
46 although Duffy (2016) argues that students are more aware than ever and it is, in fact, the  
47 performance staff who are most likely to adhere to the traditional narratives. Our personal,  
48 professional experience is that students and conservatoire leaderships alike are increasingly  
49 sensitive to the notion of curricula that prepare students for work outside the traditional  
50 parameters of professional performance but that some still do worry that this is, in some way,  
51 condoning “failure” as judged by traditional mindsets. These attitudes are evidenced by  
52 issues such as pedagogical training and improvisation remaining contested in undergraduate  
53 courses (Bennett, 2008; Haddon, 2009) even though the majority of graduates will teach, at  
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3 least as part of their careers, with improvisation being an associated contemporary skill (Hill,  
4 2017). There is now an increasing call for conservatoires to diversify to support twenty-first  
5 century portfolio music careers and for their realignment in keeping with stakeholder  
6 perceptions (Bennett, 2008, 2016; Reid et al., 2019; Zhukov, 2019). Those who place elite  
7 soloists at the top of a perceived professional hierarchy represent one such stakeholder group  
8 and, whilst our research lacks the power of generality, it can be used to develop future  
9 research questions that interrogate this stance through the lived experiences of those who  
10 perform these roles, and used alongside the perspectives of others (for example of staff,  
11 students, or alumni) to raise significant, critical questions relevant to the future direction of  
12 the conservatoire.  
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For Peer Review