Group music making in nursing homes:

investigating the experience of higher education music students

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ABSTRACT

A significant number of studies suggest that engagement with music, in its different forms, can play an important role in terms of health and wellbeing for a diverse range of participants, including older adults. Research focusing on the impact of these activities on the practitioners, namely the musicians carrying out the interventions, is at a more preliminary stage. This study investigated how tertiary-level music students experienced group music making with residents in nursing homes. A music team delivered 10 weekly music sessions in four nursing homes, focusing on singing, rhythm-based activities with percussion instruments, and listening to short, live performances. The team was composed of an experienced workshop leader, a

researcher and nine student musicians enrolled in an elective seminar. Qualitative data were collected from the students through semi-structured interviews and oral diaries and analysed using thematic analysis. The results highlight that the overall experience had a positive impact on students in both professional and personal dimensions. The findings are discussed using the lenses of mutual recovery and the PERMA model of wellbeing.

CONTRIBUTOR'S DETAILS

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Aaron Williamon, PhD, is Professor of Performance Science at the Royal College of Music (RCM) and Director of the Centre for Performance Science, a partnership of the RCM and Imperial College London. His research focuses on skilled performance and applied scientific initiatives that inform music learning and teaching, as well as the impact of music and the arts on society. He is founder of the International Symposium on Performance Science, chief editor of *Performance Science* (a Frontiers journal), and a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA) and the UK's AdvanceHE (FHEA).

KEYWORDS

Music students; health; wellbeing; fourth age, nursing homes; mutual recovery

Introduction

Research into the impact of music on older adults is now wide ranging, and it seems uncontroversial that both listening to and making music can be, at least to some extent, beneficial for this population (Fancourt & Finn 2019; Tymoszuk et al. 2018). Music forms an important part of the identity of older adults (Hays & Minichiello 2005), and it can be used to obtain benefits (Laukka 2006) that are related to several dimensions of wellbeing (Hallam & Creech 2016; MacDonald 2013). Furthermore, a significant number of studies suggest that music can have positive effects on older people with cognitive impairments (Biasutti & Mangiacotti 2018, 2021; Cooke et al. 2010; Harrison et al. 2010; Särkämö 2018). In recent years, the number of music-based interventions has increased in many countries, reinforcing the idea that both

active and receptive engagement with music can improve socio-emotional, cognitive and physical wellbeing in later life (Creech et al. 2014; Perkins et al. 2020; Perkins & Williamon 2014). Nevertheless, research documenting the perspective of the musicians involved in this field is at an early stage. Dons (2019) explored the practices of professional classically-trained musicians involved in co-creative music making (Small 1998) with older adults in four different programmes. The results revealed that, through the complex interaction with an unfamiliar audience and the implementation of a wide range of approaches, this experience provided meaningful interpersonal interactions and improved musicians' skills in terms of flexibility, improvisation and the ability to tailor music activities to the groups they were working with espoke music activities (Dons 2019). Another study explored how eight members of the London Symphony Orchestra, three members of the London Contemporary Orchestra and three musicians of the London Music Masters experienced a music making programme with primary school children and highlighted benefits in terms of identity, skills and wellbeing (Ascenso 2016).

Community music facilitators are expected to possess a broad range of skills and competences (Howell et al. 2017), and in recent years universities have begun to offer specific training programmes (Preti & Welch 2013). Some studies in this area have focused on the perspectives of music students involved in music-based activities with older adults. *Rhythm for Life* (Perkins & Williamon 2014; Perkins et al. 2015) engaged conservatory students to deliver group instrumental music lessons for adult beginners aged between 46 and 90 for 10 weeks. This type of practice offered students an opportunity for 'transformative learning' (Mezirow 2000) with long lasting effects despite the relatively short duration of the experience itself. Furthermore, it emerged that the encounter with older adults encouraged students to

reconsider their role in the community and to extend the range of their teaching techniques. A crucial consequence is that students may be encouraged to contemplate a broader range of professional opportunities (Perkins et al. 2015). Another project, *Meaningful Music in Healthcare (*MiMiC), run in a hospital setting and addressing a population composed mostly of elderly people observed the work of musicians 'in an artistic, social and situational sense' (Smilde et al. 2019:6) and investigated the interaction which occurred in the wards between music students, patients and healthcare professionals. This study revealed that students moved from feelings such as apprehension, disconnectedness and grief and found space for (self) compassion, inter-professional collaboration and shared leadership, increasing their ability to deliver bespoke music performances of artistic value. The debate on the relevance and impact of community-based activities is also flourishing in the German language literature (Bischop & Troendle 2017; Grosse 2020).

The present study aimed to increase our understanding of how higher education music students experience group music making with residents in nursing homes and to investigate the extent to which this activity impacts their wellbeing. Clarifying these aspects is urgent for many reasons. Making music at a high level can affect health and wellbeing in several ways (Williamon & Thompson 2006), provoking performance-related physical pain (Fishbein et al. 1988; Kenny & Ackermann 2015; Leaver et al. 2011), musculoskeletal disorders (Cruder et al. 2018; Zaza & Muszynski 1998) and feelings such as anxiety and distress (Antonini Philippe & Güsewell 2016; Biasutti & Concina 2014; Kenny & Osborne 2006; Kenny et al. 2004; Osborne et al. 2014). Furthermore, as the music labour market is complex and constantly evolving (Bennett & Bridgstock 2014; Smilde 2012; Triantafyllaki et al. 2012; Willis et al. 2019), it seems paramount to explore how students experience the

opportunity to employ their musical skills in innovative ways outside long-established practices such as giving concerts in traditional venues and music lessons. Clarifying these aspects is particularly important because community music activities imply 'a commitment to people, participation, places, inclusivity, and diversity' (Higgins 2018:109) and aim to promote participants' social wellbeing and personal growth as well as their musical development (Campbell & Higgins 2015). Finally, in light of the increase in the number of older adults in many countries (World Health Organization 2015) and considering the benefits music can provide for them (Paolantonio et al. 2020), it is crucial to increase the delivery of music-based interventions for older adults and to make them sustainable. The present study therefore addresses two research questions:

- *How do higher education music students experience group music making activities in nursing homes?*
- *What effects on their health and career preparation do they perceive as a result of doing these activities?*

Our investigation was informed by the notion of mutual recovery (Crawford et al. 2015), which asserts that including creative practices in healthcare environments can promote a kind of encounter that enhances the wellbeing of everyone involved, recipients/patients and providers/carers alike. A study focusing on the impact of drumming on mental health patients was also promising from the perspective of carers, who found this practice beneficial in terms of communication and connectedness (Perkins et al. 2016). A more recent contribution considered the impact of group music making on people affected by chronic psychiatric, cognitive or developmental disabilities and their caregivers, revealing that both parties experienced enjoyment and improvements in terms of intrapersonal connections and

mutual respect (Callaham et al. 2017). In the present study, we examined whether and to what extent music students acting as providers of a creative practice in nursing homes perceived benefits by interacting with the residents. The results are discussed via the theoretical framework of the PERMA model (Seligman 2011), which is based on five dimensions: Positive emotions (such as happiness, calmness and the like), Engagement (referring to significant experiences of commitment and to the notion of flow), Relationships (related to rewarding or profound social interactions), Meaningfulness (linked to individuals' identity and eudaimonic wellbeing) and Accomplishment (referring to a sense of accomplishment or mastery). This model has been used extensively in recent years in the field of music (Ascenso et al. 2017; Croom 2015; Lamont et al. 2017; Lee et al. 2017) and has been employed here to investigate the nature of the engagement and the relationships experienced by students involved in group music making with older adults. Understanding if and to what extent the engagement in this kind of activity can be meaningful, and investigating its consequences in terms of achievements, interpersonal interactions and mental states are key components of improving the quality of life and professional prospects of music students and enhancing the benefits that music brings to wider communities.

Method

Study design

This study is based on *Art for Ages*, a research project run between April 2016 and January 2017 investigating the impact of group music making on the health and wellbeing of residents in four nursing homes in Southern Switzerland. Four teams of musicians delivered a 10-week programme of group music making in four nursing

homes, one per home, combining in each session singing, rhythm-based activities, and listening to short, live performances. An experienced workshop leader and a researcher (the first author) were part of all four teams to ensure consistency of delivery and interaction with participants. The total number of music students involved was 9, with 4–5 per team and some, on a voluntary basis, involved in more than one nursing home. The number of residents involved in each session varied, as anyone wishing to join the musical activities were welcome. Consequently, the number of residents met by students ranged from a minimum of 15 to a maximum of 30 per session.

Participants and activities

Participants were higher education music students recruited on a voluntary basis. *Art for Ages* was proposed as an elective seminar assigning 2 to 5 ECTS. The seminar included a 6-hour training session delivered by the workshop leader, a sociologist with expertise in ageing and a teacher in nursing sciences. The students were trained to conduct small groups of residents singing or using percussion instruments (for instance boomwhackers, triangles, rattles, maracas and the like), to familiarize themselves with common objects (such as trashcans and graters) used as musical instruments and to facilitate residents' engagement and learning in an appropriate way. Depending on the song and activity proposed, each student supported the conducting of the workshop leader by playing his or her own instrument, or by playing or singing the same parts assigned to residents. In some cases, students were asked to conduct smaller groups of participants themselves. Students also took part in a public event delivered in each nursing home aimed at introducing the musical activities included in the programme. *Art for Ages* was run across two academic

years (Y1 and Y2), thus students could take part twice in the programme. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. Participants' characteristics.

Procedure

Each music session lasted 45 minutes. Each week students received (via email from the workshop leader) a sheet outlining the contents of the next session and the material (scores, lyrics, mp3 or YouTube links) related to the works to be performed along with the residents. The repertoire included classical, jazz, folk, pop and world music and requests from residents were welcomed. Students were also expected to perform some live music both at the beginning of, and during, the sessions: this included works arranged for the ensemble, solo pieces or duets proposed by the students themselves. For each session, a meeting was scheduled one hour beforehand to rehearse and to agree details and individual tasks with the workshop leader, as well as to receive a debriefing of variable duration.

Data collection

Data were collected through two semi-structured interviews and an oral diary. The interviews took place before the training session (interview 1) and after the end of the programme (interview 2) and the set of questions included three sections: Self-concept and functioning well personally; Career expectations; and *Art for Ages*related questions (see Appendix 1). The students participating both in Y1 and Y2 had interview 1 in Y1 only and were asked about their double participation in interview 2 at the end of Y2. The oral diary consisted of a set of seven questions related to their experience and their feelings before, during and after the session (see

Appendix 2). Students were asked to update the oral diary by sending a WhatsApp vocal message at the end of each session. The use of diaries is well-established and consolidated in qualitative research (Hewitt 2017) as, by facilitating the retrospective reconstruction of practice by participants, it supports researchers in understanding how events are perceived and understood (Kenten 2010). The breadth of the topics raised and the amount of data collected in this way offered the research team the possibility of reconstructing a rich and articulated picture for each student. Part of the results obtained in this way have been considered for the development of the seminar and as a basis to design research projects aiming to investigate music students' identity. In the present paper, we present and discuss only the themes and sub-themes closely related to students' overall experiences and to the impact of taking part in the programme. The first author, who was known to students as a member of the music team, conducted the interviews and transcribed both interviews and diaries. As a consequence of his involvement throughout the programme, the interviewer was sensitive to the possibility of influence over participants' answers and encouraged each person to express their ideas and opinions freely, allowing them to describe specific situations in detail and giving them space for digressions and unexpected discussion points (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009). The interviews were recorded with the permission of participants, and to protect their anonymity, pseudonyms are used in this article. The study was granted ethical approval by the Ethical Committee of Canton Ticino, Switzerland - CE 3030-2016-00193.

Data analysis

The whole data set was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006). Interviews 1 and 2 and the oral diaries were analysed by coding every element

considered potentially relevant to address the research questions. This procedure generated three coding schemes, which were compared and discussed to create a single list of themes and subthemes. Once unanimous consent was reached within the research team, the first author again analysed each student's data set using this list. At this stage an essentialist approach was used with the aim of understanding the 'experiences, meanings and the reality' of each participant (Braun & Clarke 2006:9). Particular attention was paid to reconstructing, to the fullest extent possible, the mutual relationships between subthemes, their evolution throughout the programme and their impact on students' wellbeing. To ensure validity, data emerging from interviews and diaries were constantly compared to detect confirmations and contradictions, and each step of the analysis was discussed with two researchers external to the project.

Results

As shown in table 2, a total of five themes and 14 subthemes emerged from our analysis. The statements extrapolated from the transcriptions of the first set of interviews are labelled *pre,* those extrapolated from the transcriptions of the second set of interviews are labelled *post* and those extrapolated from the transcriptions of the oral diaries are tagged as *D.*

Table 2. Themes and subthemes which emerged from the analysis of interviews and diaries

Appreciation of the programme

The interviews highlighted that students enthusiastically appreciated the idea of offering music making programmes to residents in nursing homes in a way that combined research and teaching components. Data revealed that the students experienced strong engagement in the project for two reasons in particular. Firstly, *Art for Ages* represented an initiative with strong social and humanitarian value; secondly, it was seen as an innovative project deserving to be repeated in the future and further developed.

Engagement in a humanitarian activity

From the interviews, it emerged that seven students were immediately interested in this programme because they saw in it the opportunity to do something useful for the community. The interviews revealed that it was important for them to find alternative spaces to the stage and concert halls to offer something valuable to those who have limited access to music. Thus, being involved in group music making in a nursing home was seen as something interesting and rewarding.

We, as musicians, are not in a separate sphere. We are in a society, and we have to give back something of what we do, not only through concerts but also to children, and maybe the older adults are [in their turn a group] that we leave aside a bit. (Natasha, pre)

[Working with the elderly] is something that makes me feel good. It stimulates me and I like it. Doing good for others and making people feel less lonely makes me feel good too. (Miriam, pre)

Engagement in an innovative programme

Students highlighted the originality and novelty of the programme in many ways. For Mark this was one of the primary reasons for his interest in the programme.

It's a new thing and I think it's very interesting, because [...] you bring music to people you don't usually bring it to. (Mark, post)

In my opinion, this activity should be done much more assiduously. It should be almost normal in nursing homes. [...] When you proposed this seminar I was immediately intrigued, because it seemed like a good idea. (Herbert, post)

Carol, who had previous experience in solidarity activities, reflected on the novelty of an initiative that combined academic training with volunteering.

I experienced [the programme] as being a bit like voluntary work: [...] an environment of higher music education allowed me to have this experience [...] and for me it was a wonderful experience. (Carol, D)

Acquisition of competences

Interviews and diaries offered room for reflection on the competences acquired by taking part in *Art for Ages* and their relations to the context of the master's degree in Performance or Instrumental Pedagogy taken by the students. In this regard, it emerged unanimously that, regardless of the master's programme attended, students considered the teaching and teamwork-related competences offered by the seminar to be particularly relevant.

Competences related to teaching

Data analysis revealed that, regardless of individual aptitude and aspirations, every student included teaching as a possible career option, as making a living through performing alone was perceived as difficult to achieve. In this sense, taking part in this seminar had a significant impact for each of them, including those who felt more reluctant about teaching. Miriam, for instance, who had had negative experiences as teacher and whose main aim was to pursue a career as a chamber musician, enrolled in the seminar associated with *Art for Ages* because she also wanted to approach teaching-related issues from a novel perspective.

First of all [I expect to] learn to relate to this reality that is unknown, because it is more typical [...] to find a child who is starting to play than an old man taking his first steps [with music]. Therefore, I expect to learn to relate to this reality [...] and understand what the teaching mechanisms are. (Miriam, pre)

Her second interview confirms both her expectation to attain those competences and her reluctance about teaching.

I never had any experience with older adults. I'd had some traumatic experiences teaching children (laughs) but it wasn't for me. Therefore, I was a bit afraid of not succeeding, of not feeling up to it, of not having the patience, of not being able to coordinate. Conversely, incredibly, every time we went there in the two nursing homes, there was always something new that I could learn or understand [...] I had no prior experience of this, so I was absolutely absorbed by all that, so it was very interesting also to understand through which means, which games, which instruments, I could capture the interest of older people in music. (Miriam, post)

Considering the perspective of students strongly oriented towards teaching, it emerged that taking part in this seminar provided further ideas about repertoires and musical activities, and it encouraged them to consider novel approaches and contexts.

It opened up another aspect of music to me [...] It gave me ideas for group teaching [...] It gave me the possibility of getting to know new games in a different context because [in the master's programme in] pedagogy, they make you do it entirely with children. (Karen, post)

Making music in a different way, namely not with the usual instruments and trying to use more imagination to bring music to everyone's level, [...] is something that I learned. And then the fact of leading a group: [...] it never happened to me before and it was a good experience, where I acquired skills. (Herbert, post)

Competences related to teamwork

Data analysis revealed that participation in this seminar represented an opportunity to develop teamwork skills. All students expected that the seminar involved working on teamwork skills, and this perspective was welcomed both by those drawn to it and by those who had previously had negative experiences in this sense.

The idea of working with a group of people committing together to something is definitely a very nice idea (Carol, pre)

It seems interesting to me. I'm not so used to working in groups, and sometimes in the past, when it happened to me, I found groups where I didn't feel good. (Natasha, pre)

It also emerged that the students perceived a lack of training in teamwork skills in their education so far, which they considered it very important to develop. For two students in particular, this was one of the main reasons for being interested in *Art for Ages*, as can be seen from the expectations of Karen and Miriam and their considerations in their second interview.

Teamwork also means learning to be in the group, and that is not an easy thing at all. (Karen, pre)

There was this team spirit which gave space to criticize each other in saying "This is fine in my opinion, this is not fine" and to work in an inclusive environment, which is something that does not happen very often. (Karen, post).

I also hope that [my participation in Art for Ages] will help me [...] to learn how to act in a group, and [...] this is something that I think will be very useful because I do not have much experience in this sense. Maybe it will also smooth out my persecution complex! (laughs) (Miriam, pre)

[My] general judgment is absolutely positive, even with regard to teamwork. [...] It's not a trivial thing, and it's something you have to learn how to do [...] You should also be educated to work in a team, it's not something that comes by itself. (Miriam, post)

Mark, who described himself as a shy person, reflected in the second interview on the fact that the support of the team allowed him to be 'daring' and thus to discover and to learn, fully benefiting in this way from participating in the programme.

At the beginning I was very hesitant and also frightened by many things I had to do and that I've never done before, like singing songs [...], but [...] among us there was a nice working atmosphere, very quiet, even relaxing [...] So, when [the teacher]

asked me to dance, I said: "Ok, I'll dance, no problem" [because] I didn't feel judged [...], because with the other students we had a good relationship [...] There was mutual support such as "You don't know how to do this thing, so I'll do it..." [...] So it was nice to work (Mark, post)

Meaningful interactions with older adults

By taking part in the *Art for Ages* programme the students had the opportunity to get to know and socialize with each other, and thanks to the teamwork component, they were able to support each other and, in some cases, make close friendships. However, from the interviews it emerged that contact with the residents was something even more significant for them and fostered feelings of affection and gratitude. Five students stated that they had had previous contact with people in the fourth age, while for four students this part of the population was distant and little known. In any case, meetings with the residents were rewarding, and the analysis revealed cases of personal contact between students and residents.

Meaningful interactions with the group of residents

Besides the specific competences acquired throughout the seminar, students had the opportunity to receive teaching directly from residents, who were seen as people of resilience, wisdom and valuable life experience.

It was also very nice when [the residents] came, at the end of the session, to thank us for the work we had done. I would say, 'Thank you for being here, and for giving us the opportunity to learn something as well'. (Miriam, D).

Diaries gave an idea of the evolution of these relationships and revealed that they reached levels of intensity sufficient to result in sadness at the end of the programme. Carol's and Natasha's diaries near to the end of the programme are particularly eloquent on this:

When I saw the faces of the residents again it was nice to recognize some that I had already memorized quite well and to meet them again [...] At the beginning I didn't think it would be like this [...] but it was really nice. (Carol, D, diary of 6 May)

With regards to today's session, [the last of the programme], I have to say that after all I was sad. [...] I'm not used to displaying my feelings [...], but in the end, when I shook hands with almost all of them to wish them a good holiday, it was touching. (Carol, D, diary of 1 July)

At this point, when we get to the nursing homes, I feel very energetic and willing to carry out an enjoyable session for them [...] Just the fact of seeing the faces we now know is very emotional for me. (Natasha, D, diary of 27 May)

I had so much fun today, [and] I was so happy at the end of the session. I was a bit sad too because we only have one session left, so I think it's going to be hard for me [she smiles] not to come back anymore [...] because I know them all and I saw how they changed, how they developed their rhythm, their attitude. (Natasha, D, diary of 17 June)

Meaningful interactions with specific residents

The diaries revealed that closer interactions between individual students and residents could occur during the sessions.

At the end of the session we were able to talk a little bit with them [...], and I think this is interesting because in this way we created a good relationship [...] This time I talked a lot with A., who is a very nice woman, very smart and mentally healthy, and I liked this, also [because] she gave me something back. (Lisa, D)

I've seen that there is an old lady, one of the most active, who, poor thing, struggles to move, but she is always smiling. She reminds me a lot of my grandmother, and this makes me feel better. I mean, seeing her happy after every session makes me really happy too. (Ellen, D)

Benefits on psychological and physical dimensions

Data analysis revealed that taking part in this programme had a positive impact on psychological and physical dimensions. This seems to be due mostly to two elements. On the one hand, the signs of enthusiasm and increasing engagement of the residents and their musical progress, which provided a sense of gratification and increased students' energy, motivation and self-esteem. On the other hand, the concentration and commitment experienced during the sessions to engage and entertain the residents caused some students to perceive improvements in their physical health.

Perceived decrease of physical pain and sickness

It emerged in two cases that being engaged in music making had a positive impact on students' physical conditions, relieving pain or sickness. Students were surprised by this and associated it with their contact with the residents: making music with older adults and devoting attention and energy to improve their wellbeing promoted mutual benefits and, in turn, improved students' wellbeing.

When I started the session [...] physically I didn't feel very well because I had back pain and I thought it would be a problem because it really hurt me [...] When I finished, one thing that surprised me was that I realized during the session my back didn't hurt at all. [...] I was happy because it's a personal physical thing of mine, but working with them, it disappeared. (Lisa, D)

I was feeling very tired and not physically well [...] I had fluctuating fever for a week, so it was a bit difficult, and now, despite having the flu and other illnesses, I feel much better because every time I completed the session, in which we gave them smiles and we were together, I felt better. I felt like a better person. (Ellen, D)

Energy

The commitment required by the sessions, probably combined with the sense of fulfilment just described, offered a long lasting energy boost in two cases, even when stress and fatigue accumulated over the previous days were heavy.

I was rather sleepy before I started, and during the whole session I felt very well and very awake, [and this] even later: [...] I could study well, and I didn't think I could do it because all morning I didn't feel physically well, and I thought I should stay home and rest. Instead, after the session I felt so much energy, I felt much better physically and mentally, very active and happy [...] I think that these activities not only improve the wellbeing of the residents but also our wellbeing. (Natasha, D)

When we finished the session, I was definitely more attentive and more alert, but [also] calm, relaxed. I felt I had done something I like, something beautiful. (Lisa, D)

Sense of gratification

Diaries highlighted that the joy and the engagement expressed by residents throughout the programme had a strong impact on students that lasted long after the end of each session. Observing these signs after playing, conducting and interacting with them, and being aware that this was appreciated, provided students with positive feelings and a sense of achievement.

Seeing that our music was appreciated [...] makes me feel good because I feel part of this project, and [...] as a general feeling, I feel euphoric. (Carol, D)

After the session I was physically tired because today I had a busy day [...], but anyway I felt happy [...] I saw happy faces, [signs of] thanks, and I liked these gestures. For example, a woman who [usually has the same expression], at the end, when I said to everyone: "Goodbye, see you next week", she smiled at me and said: "Goodbye, bye", with a nice smile! [...] These things remain with me a lot. (Natasha, D)

Reassessment of assumptions

Participation in this programme represented an important life experience for the students and promoted profound reflections. Being committed to a project focusing on the wellbeing of a vulnerable group of people motivated the students to reconsider the ultimate value of making music and their tendency towards perfectionism. At the same time, the opportunity to make music in an unfamiliar context and the interactions with older adults invited them to contemplate new professional opportunities and offered life lessons in a broad sense.

Thoughts about the reasons for making music

In their interviews, the students also had the opportunity to talk about what they considered as an overriding reason for making music. It emerged that they became increasingly aware of a desire to share the beauty of music and to help others experience the intense emotions, meaning and perspectives on life that it can generate. For two students in particular, the intensity of the reactions of residents, combined with the absence of competitiveness and the enjoyable atmosphere created in each session, had a particularly significant impact on reconsidering the reasons for their motivations to make music.

[Art for Ages] woke me up. It led me to remember why I make music [...]: it's to be in front of other people who are looking at you, and you have to give them a glimpse of something beautiful. (Ellen, post)

[Art for Ages] showed me that music is not only what we see in the conservatory, which is to some extent a very limited environment [...] We didn't perform virtuoso pieces in a perfect way [...], and yet I saw much more joy in that room than in a Conservatory room when there is an exam and people play very well. [...] In the past I thought I'd stop playing, even taking other paths, but also thanks to this experience I understood that music [...] is part of everyone [...] We musicians have the luck of deepening this thing so much, and it's sad to keep it only for oneself, to do concerts and relate only with people who understand music (Mark, post)

Questioning of perfectionism

Inclusiveness was one of the main features of *Art for Ages*, and for students it was clear that achieving perfect musical results was not the principal goal of the sessions. In their final interview, Lisa and Natasha were particularly explicit in questioning the tendency towards perfectionism to which musicians are often accustomed and to argue that technically impeccable performances may not always be necessary to communicate with audiences.

Many times when we are practising, we are only focused on the difficulties and on the huge pressure we have. [...] I used to go [into the nursing home] and would feel more relaxed at the end as I saw that I did something useful with music. (Lisa, post)

As a musician, I think I've grasped a little the ability to bring music closer to the listener [...] I remember one day I was playing there, and I really thought: "You're playing for them. It's not important if you're wrong or if you're perfect, [...] You're playing for them, to make them happy and that must be your thought, don't be worried about the technique, [...] you can give something". (Natasha, post)

Discovery of new professional opportunities

The interviews and the diaries also offered room for thoughts related to professional opportunities once academic studies were completed. These ideas seem to fall among the motivations that prompted Lisa to participate in *Art for Ages* activities.

I expect to see that what I do every day, [namely] practicing to be a flautist, [...] is useful for someone, and that we are not only musicians suitable to play in the most famous concert halls in the world, but also to work with other people, who can give

you another reaction that maybe you don't have with the normal audience of a concert hall. (Lisa, pre)

In her second interview, she spoke explicitly about a widening of perspective.

I must say that [Art for Ages] changed my vision of my future because I discovered an activity that I like and that I would like to do again. (Lisa, post)

This vision was shared by Karen and Herbert too, who hoped that group music making would become a consolidated practice in nursing homes. They declared being open to integrating their future professional activities also in this sense.

I think it's a very beautiful and creative project, and it opened a new path for me. [...] In the future, if there was the possibility, I could also choose such a path. (Karen, post)

Talking about job opportunities [...] if in the future I have the chance to work in this kind of field, I will do it because I like it. (Herbert, post)

The 19-year-old Emma did not talk specifically about nursing homes but stated at the end of the programme that she had discovered an interest in teaching which previously was completely suppressed by her desire to work only as a performer.

Before, I was more [the kind of musician saying] "I do want to play!" Now, I think that it would be a great thing to teach too because I liked to take care of [the residents'] needs, and so I realized that [teaching] would be [...] something that would give me satisfaction anyway. (Emma, post)

Thoughts about personal dimensions

Diaries and interviews suggest more or less explicitly that the involvement in *Art for Ages* led each student to a reconsideration of general elements outside the musical activity. Miriam revealed in the first interview that she expected the project to have an impact on the personal sphere too.

Definitely [Art for Ages] will give me something [...] not only in the professional field, but also, obviously, as a life experience: it can teach me to have more patience, for example [...] So [I expect that it will help me to] mature aspects of my personality, to increase awareness of my abilities and limitations, then apply them in daily life. (Miriam, pre)

At the end of the programme, that expectation seemed to be to some extent satisfied.

Being always so oppressed by the idea of "What will I do tomorrow?" or "What will become of me?" or "Will I find a job?" does not help me to live well today [...] [Art for Ages] has helped me a lot in this [...] I realized that, after all, to be stressed daily for things that do not depend on us, is basically pointless. It also gave me some serenity, I mean, being in contact with these people who were enthusiastic about even small things [...] [pushed] me to try to be a little more relaxed, to be a little calmer, a little more positive too (laughs) [...] In my opinion [it] will help me a lot in life in general. (Miriam, post)

With regards to interpersonal relationships in a broad sense, Lisa and Emma revealed that they have learned to manage relationships with people who were, in some ways, different from themselves.

I'm very happy to have participated, and I think I've learned a lot of things, for example how to deal with people, to establish relationships, to be close to someone

you haven't known for a long time but that you can still make happy [...] You can give them something of yourself [...], and that energy somehow comes back to you. (Natasha, D)

I have a greater awareness of myself in dealing with a larger group of people. I've learned to have a relationship with a group of people I never knew before, so if this happens again, I'll know how to deal with them. (Emma, post)

DISCUSSION

The results of this study showed that the overall experience of being involved in a programme of group music making in nursing homes was something significant and engaging for students. From the data, a strong appreciation emerged for both the humanitarian value of the programme and for the innovative component of this educational opportunity. The interviews and diaries revealed that both factors played a significant role in the students' experience. It became apparent that they felt useful as a result of acting as a music facilitator in close contact with the residents, being at the same time taught and coordinated by a workshop leader in the context of a tertiary-level seminar. Students reported benefits on psychological and physical dimensions, meaningful interactions with residents and acquisition of competences considered relevant. This stimulated students to reflect on the meaning of making music and on their role in society. In this way, the overall experience impacted both professional and personal dimensions.

Figure 1. Perceived effects on professional and personal dimensions resulting from participation in the programme.

With regards to the professional dimension, our analysis revealed that students considered it very likely that they would be involved in teaching in the future, regardless of their attitudes towards this activity and of the master's degree they were attending. This is due to the difficulties related to the profession of musician and the fear of not being able to make a living by working only as a performer. These results are in line with those of studies dedicated to the entry of musicians into the world of work (Bennett 2009) and are novel in highlighting students' interest in alternative teaching contexts to traditional ones. The interest shown by the residents, their appreciation of music and their potential in terms of learning had been very surprising for the students, and the dynamics of the programme have stimulated reflections on engaging a wider population through their musical competences. These aspects highlight the need to overcome misconceptions about the resources of older people (Levitin 2020; Withnall et al. 2004) and to consider more carefully both their interest in listening to music (Costa & Ockelford 2019; Hays & Minichiello 2005) and their ability to improve their musical competences (Dabback & Smith 2012; Gembris 2008; Prickett 2003; Salmon & Meyer 1998). At the same time, it seems important to increase students' awareness of the potential of their skills in the contexts of community music (Higgins 2008, 2018; Langston & Barrett 2008; Lee et al. 2017; Li & Southcott 2012; Veblen & Waldron 2018), arts-based interventions (Fancourt & Finn 2019) and arts-based prescriptions (Poulos et al. 2018; Thompson et al. 2017). A further aspect linked to the professional dimension is related to the skills acquired by students. Although it could be expected that students enrolled in a Master of Pedagogy course would be interested in acquiring competences related to teaching, interestingly the other students also considered these competences particularly relevant. These results, while suggesting possible links with the notion of transformative learning (Mezirow 2000) highlighted in a previous study (Perkins &

Williamon 2014), call for further research. The potential of community-based music activities in terms of music students' career perspectives should be investigated.

With regards to learning opportunities, students greatly appreciated the possibility of acquiring teamwork competences, which were considered very important and lacking in their backgrounds. For developing teamwork competences it is relevant to consider not only the importance of the quality of relationships between fellow musicians (Dobson & Gaunt 2015; Ginsborg et al. 2012; Lim 2014), but also the need to interact with other professionals in the context of arts-based interventions (Smilde et al. 2019).

The interviews highlighted that students found themselves reflecting on their own perfectionism, an aspect that can play a very important role in making the profession of musician unsustainable over the years and which often causes problems such as stage fright, anxiety and depression (Kenny 2011; Langendörfer et al. 2006; Steptoe 1989; Wesner et al. 1990).

Considering the personal sphere, the results highlighted perceived benefits of taking part in the sessions on a number of dimensions. Students reported a sense of gratification, energy and relief in perceived illnesses, which could last long after the sessions ended. Our analysis suggests that the commitment and the concentration experienced during the sessions, the desire to provide relief and joy to residents, and the signals of gratitude received had an important impact on students. In light of the benefits perceived in turn by the residents involved in *Art for Ages* (Paolantonio et al. 2020), we consider these results to align with the notion of mutual recovery (Crawford et al. 2015), which elucidates 'how recovery for physical and mental health could occur through a new parity of shared practice within and across […] groups or communities, and how creative practice may assist such a mutual process,

countering the traditional focus only on individuals more obviously in need, that is patients or clients' (p.142). We also learned that the students found humanitarian value in the programme, and interviews revealed that the possibility of giving something back to society was one of the reasons for participating in the seminar. This element, in line with studies focusing on professionals involved in community-based activities (Ascenso 2016; Higgins 2018; Preti & Welch 2013), deserves further research and suggests that dynamics referable to mutual recovery (Crawford et al. 2015) occurred between students and residents. It emerged from diaries and interviews that being involved in group music making in an inclusive and cheerful environment, where the distance between musicians and audience was eliminated, was engaging and rewarding. Students had the opportunity to observe closely how their musical skills can be beneficial for other people, and the positive reactions of residents in terms of participation, appreciation and gratitude created a virtuous circle beneficial for both groups. Furthermore, students reported that they had received teachings and points of reflection from the encounter with older adults. These insights were not confined to professional practice and were expected to have a wide and long-lasting impact. This aspect highlights the need of further research in order to better define the potential for community-based activities to inform learning opportunities, personal development and self-concept for higher education music students. Finally, session after session students developed a sense of familiarity or even feelings of affection towards residents. In this way, the idea that creative practices can reduce social barriers and strengthen identities and communities for the benefit of all actors involved (Crawford et al. 2015) seems to be reflected also in group music making involving young musicians and older adults. These promising findings encourage an increase in this kind of offer in music universities. The literature suggests indeed that higher education students are in many cases immersed

in a phase of life that presents challenges in personal and economic dimensions (Stallmann 2010). Furthermore, those involved in music are used to studying in an environment largely based on one-to-one lessons (Perkins et al. 2017), where individual talent occupies a central position (Kingsbury 2001) and competition is very high (Demirbatir 2015; Pecen et al. 2018).

Considering this overall picture through the lens of the PERMA model, our findings highlighted that this experience had a relevant impact on students, in particular in terms of *meaningfulness, relationships and engagement.* The opportunity to use their musical skills in the context of nursing homes gave students new insights about the power and the meaningfulness of music, and the opportunity to interact with a new kind of audience invited them to reconsider their role in society. These aspects are closely linked with the dimension of *meaningfulness*, which is related to virtuous actions and feelings, transcending individual pleasure and linked to purpose in life (De Muijnck 2013; Forgeard et al. 2011; Ryan & Deci 2001; Seligman 2011; Sirgy & Wu 2011). The encounter with older adults was rewarding in terms of social *relationships*, as it provided valuable teachings which at the same time increased social bonding. This resonates with the idea that making music with others can increase social capital and promote a sense of trust and reciprocity (Procter 2011), which are dimensions that impact positively on resilience and wellbeing (Noble & McGrath 2008). Moreover, the importance attributed to teamwork suggests that this component may also have positive benefits in terms of relationships and mutual support between peers (Crawford 2015; Smilde et al. 2019). Considering that for musicians, due to their professional commitments, it can be challenging to have and maintain satisfying interpersonal relationships (Ascenso 2017) and that consolidated social bonds are correlated with higher evaluations of meaning in life by musicians

(Hicks & King 2009), these results are encouraging and invite further research. The concentration and commitment that emerged from diaries and interviews suggest that students experienced *engagement* to a significant extent during the sessions. Situations and feelings referable to states described as complete absorption in the present moment and perception of progress attained (Nakamura & Csiszentmihalyi 2009) or to enjoyment and concentration in doing something intrinsically interesting (Strati et al. 2011) emerged from their accounts.

Some limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. Firstly, neither our programme nor the study systematically observed the interactions between students and the staff of the nursing homes, nor did it include the perspective of the workshop leader. An ethnographic investigation, including fieldnotes and group discussions, could help to understand more deeply the interactions between all actors involved. A clearer view of these points could be useful to make students' learning experiences more comprehensive. Systematically investigating carers' perspectives could provide useful indications to improve musicians' ability to collaborate effectively with them (Smilde et al. 2019), while closely observing the interactions during the rehearsal and the debriefing could offer a deeper understanding about the learning experiences of students in terms of musical competences. Collecting a wider range of data would also be useful in limiting the risk of acquiescence or social acceptability bias that may affect students interviewed in the context of their music university. A further limitation of the present study is linked to the recruitment procedure, which was carried out on the basis of students' participation in an elective seminar. Consequently, our results should be considered with caution, as the methodology used in this study did not observe their individual predispositions towards this kind of commitment with music in depth. The impact of this type of learning experience

on students with different aspirations and aptitudes remains to be verified. Moreover, the design of the seminar did not include the transfer of specific skills in terms of arranging and conducting, and although students were given room to define repertoires and to conduct small groups of residents, the implications of this type of training remain to be investigated. Finally, the programme carried out in each nursing home lasted ten weeks. As a consequence, the impact in terms of wellbeing, workload, and learning opportunities of a longer commitment in nursing homes still requires further investigation.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to investigate how higher education music students experienced their involvement in group music making programmes in nursing homes and the perceived effects of this activity on their wellbeing. The results suggested that students reported benefits on professional and personal spheres, and it emerged that this experience had a significant impact in terms of wellbeing. Developing the curriculum on facilitating the commitment of music students to community-based interventions is important not only because arts-based interventions can provide benefits to large and diversified segments of populations, but also because the music professionals involved can benefit in terms of skills and wellbeing, at the same time reinforcing their role in the community.

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APPENDIX 1: LIST OF QUESTIONS USED FOR THE INTERVIEWS

List of questions used in the interview before the beginning of the programme

Self-concept and functioning well personally

1. Imagine you had to describe yourself to someone that had just met you, what would you say?
2. In general, to what extent do you feel that what you do in your life is valuable and worthwhile?

Career expectations

3. How would you describe your musical activity?
4. How would you describe the career you expect to have?

5. What do you consider to be the greatest benefits from having this kind of career?

6. What are your greatest concerns about embarking on this kind of career?

Art for Ages related questions

7. What benefits do you think the older adults will have by taking part in the programme?

8. What kind of competences do you think you will develop by taking part in this project?

9. How do you feel about doing musical activities with older adults?

10. How do you feel about working in a team?

11. What do you think will be the challenges of the programme?

12. To what extent will what you expect to learn be relevant for your career?

List of questions used in the interview at the end of the programme

Self-concept and functioning well personally

1. Imagine you had to describe yourself to someone that had just met you, what would you say?

2. In general, to what extent do you feel that what you do in your life is valuable and worthwhile?

Career expectations

3. How would you describe your musical activity?

4. How would you describe the career you expect to have?

5. What do you consider the greatest benefits from having this kind of career?

6. What are your greatest concerns about embarking on this kind of career?

a. Did the programme change your attitude towards your career?

Art for ages related questions

7. What is your general evaluation of the experience?

8. What benefits do you think the older adults will have had by taking part in the programme?

9. What kind of competences did you develop by taking part in this project?

10. How do you feel about doing musical activities with older adults?

a. Specifically, has this been influenced by Art for Ages?

11. How do you feel about working in a team?

12. What, if any, were the challenges of the programme?

13. To what extent was what you learned relevant for your career?

List of questions for the interviews at the end of the programme with students who attended twice

Career expectations

14. How would you describe your musical activity? Has it somehow changed in the last few months?

15. How would you describe the career you expect to have? Did it somehow change in the last few months?

16. What do you consider the greatest benefits from having such a career? Did your thoughts about that somehow change in the last few months?

17. What are your greatest concerns about embarking on such a career? Did your thoughts about that somehow change in the last few months?

18. Has the programme changed your attitude towards your planned career? If yes, in what sense?

Art for Ages related questions

19. What differences, if any, did you see between the first and the second year of the programme?

a. *Differences regarding yourself*

  i. What kind of competences did you develop by taking part twice in this project?

 ii. How do you feel about doing musical activities with older adults?

iii. How do you feel about working in a team?

b. *Differences regarding participants' experience*

  i. What benefits do you think the older adults will have had by taking part in the programme?

 ii. Did you see relevant differences between this year's programme and the previous one?

c. *Thoughts about the overall programme*

  i. How would you describe the overall programme? What are, if any, the differences between this year's programme and the previous one?

 ii. How would you describe the contents of the programme? What are, if any, the differences between this year's programme and the previous one?

iii. How would you describe your experience of working in a team? What are, if any, the differences between this year's programme and the previous one?

20. What did you like most about the programme?

21. What did you like least about the programme?

22. How would you change the programme?

23. Would you like to be the leader of a project similar to this programme?

a. How would you arrange it?

b. What would be your needs?

24. To what extent was what you learned relevant for your career?

25. What is your evaluation of the overall experience?

26. Is there something you would like to add?

APPENDIX 2: LIST OF QUESTIONS USED FOR THE ORAL DIARIES

1. How would you describe your experience of today's session?

2. What were the greatest moments?

3. What were the most enjoyable tasks?

4. What, if any, were the challenges of today's session?

5. Suppose that you were in charge and could make changes that would make the

    programme better. What would you do?

6. How did you feel when you started today's intervention?

7. How do you feel now?

Table 1. Participants' characteristics.

NAME	GENDER	AGE (19-26, mean 23.1, SD ± 1.9)	COURSE ATTENDED	INSTRUMENT LEARNING	ACADEMIC YEAR
Lisa	Female	24	MA in Performance (1 year)	Flute	Y1
Karen	Female	24	MA in Pedagogy (2 year)	Viola	Y1
Miriam	Female	24	MA in Performance (1 year)	Cello	Y1
Ellen	Female	22	MA in Performance (1 and 2 year)	Guitar	Y1 + Y2
Herbert	Male	26	MA in Performance (1 year) then MA in Pedagogy	Piano	Y1 + Y2
Carol	Female	24	MAS in Advanced Studies (1 year)	Piano	Y1
Natasha	Female	24	MA in Performance (1 year and 2 year)	Flute	Y1 + Y2
Emma	Female	19	MA in Performance (1 year)	Flute	Y2
Mark	Male	21	BA in Music (3 year)	Cello	Y2

Table 2. Themes and subthemes which emerged from the analysis of interviews and diaries

OVERARCHING THEMES	SUBTHEMES
Appreciation of the programme	Engagement in a humanitarian activity Engagement in an innovative programme
Acquisition of competences	Competences related to teaching Competences related to teamwork
Meaningful interactions with older adults	With the group of residents With specific residents
Benefits on psychological and physical dimensions	Perceived decrease of physical pain and sickness Energy Sense of gratification
Reassessment of assumptions	Thoughts about the reasons for making music Questioning of perfectionism Discovery of new professional opportunities Thoughts about personal dimensions