

Encounters with Participatory Music

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1. Introduction

It is increasingly the case that students training for a professional career in music will have some encounter with either formal music education, more socially-engaged musical practices or both as part of their studies (Bennett 2012). Historically, such encounters may have been perceived as a distraction from or, at worse, a negation of students' emerging identity as performing musicians (Freer and Bennett 2012). Accordingly, such encounters may not have been considered an important part of a student's development as a performing artist. However, when student musicians encounter participatory music, what they discover is a more complex, less familiar, often exciting and sometimes uncomfortable experience of the performance of human relationships through music, which may inspire them to pursue participatory music or music education as an important dimension of their future careers. In a less direct way, such encounters may also prepare them for the collaborative and relational world of chamber music, by involving them in more dialogic musical exchanges where there is an emphasis on mutual "subjectification" (Biesta 2014, p. 18) through music, i.e., *showing up* for each other, each party finding their own voice within a "simultaneous dialogue" (Barenboim 2009, p. 20) of polyphony. Such encounters may also help with students' musical confidence by giving them opportunities to be musical outside of the perfectionist culture of the conservatoire. Above all, being able to accommodate some of these paradigmatic shifts in thinking about and experiencing music's quality and value is what lies at the heart of the benefits of the encounters described in this chapter.

Aesthetic and Participatory Traditions

Undergraduate conservatoire students will have spent years in dedicated individual/solo practice in order to realise their aspirations as professional performers within the performance traditions of the concert hall. In general terms, one might characterise their professional development as falling within a Kantian paradigm of aesthetics involving "an exceptional instinctive talent enabling true artists to produce outstanding objects of beauty that express vital ideas for aesthetic perception and appreciation among those with cultivated aesthetic tastes" (Väkevä 2012, p. 93). An attendant perfectionist attitude manifests itself in the conservatoire in the form of "musical hierarchies and vocational position taking" (Perkins 2013) within an atmosphere of intense competition. While this may be a necessary element of students'

preparation for the competitive world of professional practice, it can also impact negatively on their health and wellbeing (Perkins et al. 2017).

Such immersion in aesthetic traditions may also render participatory music practices as more unfamiliar musical contexts for undergraduate conservatoire students. In participatory settings, there is a stronger emphasis on the realisation of social relations through collective musical performance (Turino 2008, p. 36; Camlin 2018), where a more “relational” aesthetic centred around “the sphere of human relations” (Bourriaud 1998, p. 44) is emphasised, and where notions of musical “quality” are inextricably connected to the social context of participation (Chernoff 1979, p. 153). In this “construction of a shared habitat” (Bourriaud 1998, p. 56), music becomes “a social praxis that springs from people’s shared musical actions, understandings, and values” (Silverman et al. 2013, p. 4). In other words, it is fundamentally a relational practice:

The act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies. They are to be found not only between those organised sounds which are conventionally thought of as being the stuff of musical meaning but also between the people who are taking part, in whatever capacity, in the performance; and they model, or stand as metaphor for, ideal relationships as the participants in the performance imagine them to be: relationships between person and person, between individual and society, between humanity and the natural world and even perhaps the supernatural world. (Small 1998, p. 13)

Of course, we should not think of these different emphases as belonging exclusively to any particular musical practice. Indeed, the “performance” of both works and relationships might be seen to be integral to all kinds of musical performance.

Some of the apparent tensions between performing traditions—the aesthetic tradition of performing “works”, on the one hand, and the participatory tradition of performing “relationships”, on the other—can be at least partially resolved when one considers the “paramusical” (Stige et al. 2013, p. 298) benefits which arise from within both aesthetic and participatory dimensions of music (Camlin et al. 2020, p. 2). For example, the impact on the wellbeing and mood of all those participating is valued equally highly in both traditions, as are the affordances for social cohesion and social bonding, which appear to attend all instances of musical endeavour in one way or another.

Similarly, we might recognise the notion of entrainment (Clayton et al. 2005)—both musical and neurobiological (Camlin 2021)—as underpinning all kinds of musical performance. While we might view Small’s idea of the performance

of relationships as a metaphor for how musicking might unite its performers and participants, a neurobiological understanding of the musical process enables us to make a stronger claim: that the performance of relationships through music may be literal as well as metaphorical. The phenomenon of “self-other merging as a consequence of inter-personal synchrony” (Tarr et al. 2014, p. 1) highlights how the neurobiology of those engaged in musical activities may come to attune to and resonate with that of their co-participants, through the sympathetic entanglement of neurobiological, musical and neurohormonal mechanisms (Camlin et al. 2020, p. 12). Understood in this way, we can see how musicking might contribute to the phenomenon of “limbic resonance” (Lewis et al. 2001, pp. 169–70), an interpersonal neurobiological connection which underpins the experience of a healthy relationship. In other words, musicking might provide the conditions of “safe danger” where people can experience relational intimacy, even love (Camlin et al. 2020, p. 12). This capacity of music to forge a deep sense of interpersonal connection is recognisable across the whole spectrum of aesthetic and participatory traditions and is an essential basis for claiming music as a unified, pluralistic and diverse human experience.

However, these contrasting traditions have historically given rise to more dichotomous positions, perhaps especially so in response to educational and cultural policy developments over the last 40 years (Wright 2013, p. 15). Discourse has often reduced discussion of the complexity of musical experience to more binary arguments concerning “product vs. process” or “excellence vs. access/inclusion” (Camlin 2015a, 2017). Especially in institutions such as conservatoires—charged with the preservation of aesthetic traditions—an attendant culture of perfectionism has often occluded a more critical appraisal of participatory musical traditions. While these debates have ultimately stagnated, involvement in participatory music activities—or music education more broadly—can be “sometimes viewed as a less prestigious alternative to performance” (Hallam and Gaunt 2012, p. 140) for aspiring musicians:

Coupled with dominant discourses placing performance as the pinnacle of success for a musician (Bennett 2008), it is not uncommon for students to feel ‘second-rate’ if they redefine their career aims to include activities beyond performance. (Perkins 2012, p. 11)

Encounters with participatory music for some conservatoire students might even be taken as a “negation” of one’s primary identity as a performing musician. Using the psychological model of “possible selves”,¹ Freer and Bennett (2012), for example, studied the attitudes of student musicians toward an emerging

¹ In other words, “the selves that we would very much like to become. They are also the selves we could become, and the selves we are afraid of becoming” (Markus and Nurius 1986, p. 954).

musical identity, which included that of music educator. What they discovered was that for many music students, identifying as a music educator was perceived as “a negative outcome that follow[s] from an unrealised or unattainable performance goal” (Freer and Bennett 2012, p. 275).

Recent studies suggest that these historical tensions between performer and teacher identity may have become less pronounced in recent years (Pellegrino 2019), with some reports suggesting that for professional musicians, these kinds of encounters provide “an opportunity to see the power of music more directly and to gain a stronger perception of what it means to be a musician” (Ascenso 2016, p. 4).

Nevertheless, the developmental challenges facing “those musicians who think of themselves also as teachers” (Swanwick 1999, p. i) is very much bound up in the sheer complexity of the musical activities in which they may be involved. This complexity is compounded not just by the different kinds of music which students may encounter in participatory music settings, but also by the diversity of people who populate those practices and the many different kinds of human relationships implicated within such participation. Small’s philosophy emphasises the way in which the music itself can become a way of experiencing those relationships:

The relationships of a musical performance are enormously complex, too complex, ultimately, to be expressed in words. But that does not mean that they are too complex for our minds to encompass. The act of musicking, in its totality, itself provides us with a language by means of which we can come to understand and articulate those relationships and through them to understand the relationships of our lives. (Small 1998, p. 14)

In truth, the encounters described in this chapter might be seen to be encounters with community music (CM), but within the conservatoire, there remains some resistance to the term, connoting, as it does, a set of practices which may be perceived as heterodoxical to the aims and values of the institution. Philosophically, there are no grounds for limiting discourse about music in this way, but the prejudice remains. CM itself is a contested term, a diverse and pluralistic set of situated practices which evade a definition and consensus (Higgins 2012, p. 3; Brown et al. 2014; Camlin 2016), often hinging on ideas of music both as an “intervention” and as a series of “acts of hospitality” in the Derridaean tradition:

Community music may be understood as an approach to active music-making and musical knowing outside of formal teaching and learning situations. Community music is an intentional intervention, involving skilled music leaders, who facilitate group music-making experiences in environments that do not have set curricula. Here, there is an emphasis on people, participation, context, equality of opportunity, and diversity.

Musicians who work in this way seek to create relevant and accessible music-making experiences that integrate activities such as listening, improvising, musical invention, and performing. (Higgins 2012, p. 3)

While the terms “community music” and “participatory music” remain closely related, they are not synonymous. For the purposes of this chapter, I will refer mainly to the latter insofar as it emphasises more relational as distinct from more presentational forms of music making (Turino 2008). What sense, therefore, do contemporary music students make of their encounters with participatory music, and what insights into their emerging identity as musicians do these encounters afford?

2. Methodology

2.1. Justification of Approach

The experience of participatory music is highly individualised and also “situated” in socio-cultural contexts that are as diverse as the practices contained within them (Camlin and Zeserson 2018). Therefore, a general understanding of what it may mean to engage in participatory musical practices can only go so far—for each individual so involved, a personal perspective of what such engagement means to them may be taken as a more valuable indicator of significance. This study, therefore, did not set out to make general inferences about universal experiences of participatory music; rather, it attempted to understand the practical and epistemological complexities and challenges faced by individual students from a conservatoire background as they developed their agency within participatory music settings and explored, through dialogue with more experienced practitioners, how some of these complexities and challenges might be addressed.

2.2. Participants

Half ($n = 5$) of the participants involved in the study were undergraduates at the Royal College of Music, London (henceforth, RCM), who had undertaken an elective module in participatory musical practices, where they were required to co-lead music workshop activities across a range of settings, including with groups of children, young people and adults, in early years and in health and wellbeing settings, as well as with groups of participants experiencing some kind of disadvantage, e.g., disabilities or forced migration. The remainder ($n = 5$) were musicians with more established practice in participatory settings, purposively selected to represent a breadth of experience from music/theatre performance, music health and wellbeing, music education and socially engaged music contexts outside of the RCM. Ethical approval for the study was given by Conservatoires UK (CUK) via the RCM Ethics Committee on 5 December 2019, and informed consent was obtained from all participants as

a pre-condition of participation. There were not considered to be any significant ethical issues associated with the study.

2.3. *Methods*

In order “to understand the perception [of the experience] in terms of the meaning it has for the subject” (Gallagher and Zahavi 2012, p. 7), a more phenomenological method of enquiry was employed, consisting of three phases:

- A. Participant Questionnaire ($n = 10$)—an online questionnaire consisting of a series of open questions as prompts for participants to reflect on their experience of participatory music;
- B. Focus Group ($n = 7$)—a face-to-face participant discussion of each other’s questionnaire responses, with those able to attend. All questionnaire respondents were invited but 3 were unable to attend;
- C. Prioritisation Exercise ($n = 7$)—a collective prioritisation exercise conducted during the focus group, where participants identified and organised emerging themes into a hierarchy of significance.

2.3.1. Questionnaire

The initial online questionnaire invited participants to reflect on their experiences of their encounters with participatory music and the impact of such experiences on their development as performing musicians, using a series of open questions:

1. Please tell me about your practice as a musician;
2. Please tell me about your encounter/s with participatory music, i.e., music workshops, music facilitation, leading groups;
3. What do you/have you enjoy(ed) about this kind of work?
4. What (if anything) do you find/have you found challenging about working in participatory settings?
5. What do you think are the benefits of being involved in this kind of work?
6. What impact (if any) does being involved in participatory music have on your practice as a performing musician?

2.3.2. Focus Group

All participants were subsequently invited to participate in a focus group to discuss the emerging themes of their collective reflections. Prior to the focus group, all participants had access to all the anonymised questionnaire responses. During the focus group, participants were given a set of instructions to:

1. Discuss the questionnaire responses together (sharing the “air-time” equally between them);

2. Identify themes which they felt were significant;
3. Organise these themes in terms of their perceived significance.

To minimise bias, the researcher remained outside of the discussion, except when responding directly to a question (Denscombe 2017, p. 206; Eros 2014, pp. 279–81).

2.3.3. Data Analysis

This approach led to the generation of three sets of complementary data sources for analysis:

- i. Participant questionnaire responses;
- ii. Transcript of focus group discussion;
- iii. Diagram of prioritisation exercise.

The approach to data analysis was broadly inductive, using the themes identified by participants during the focus group prioritisation exercise (iii) in order to build categories of analysis from participants’ own interpretation of respective thematic significance. These categories were then used to undertake an initial coding of the other data at both (i) and (ii). A further round of inductive analysis was undertaken on those data which had eluded categorisation during the initial coding, identifying further emerging themes and organising data around those themes.

3. Findings

3.1. Stage 1—Results of Focus Group Thematic Prioritisation

The focus group thematic prioritisation exercise (iii) resulted in a concept map, created by the participants, of nine themes organised in three layers of significance, from 1 (highest) to 3 (lowest):

1	Power and Hierarchy	Mindsets	Purpose	Diversity/Representation
2	Communication	Complexity of Relationships		Setting/Environment
3	Risk/Adaptability		Skills	

This categorisation reflects the general feelings of the focus group participants about what they deemed significant not just in the stories they had all shared, but in their subsequent discussions of them.

3.2. Stage 2—Initial Analysis

These categories were then used to undertake a deductive coding of the other data (i and ii), using Nvivo software. Phrases or exchanges in the data which corresponded with any of the categories were highlighted accordingly, and a hierarchy chart of the coding density was developed, consisting of three main emergent themes with eight

dependent categories. The two main themes related to a contextual understanding of the experience (situational factors) and an awareness of the professional attributes required to meet those situational complexities; a third theme was identified as diversity and representation (Figure 1).

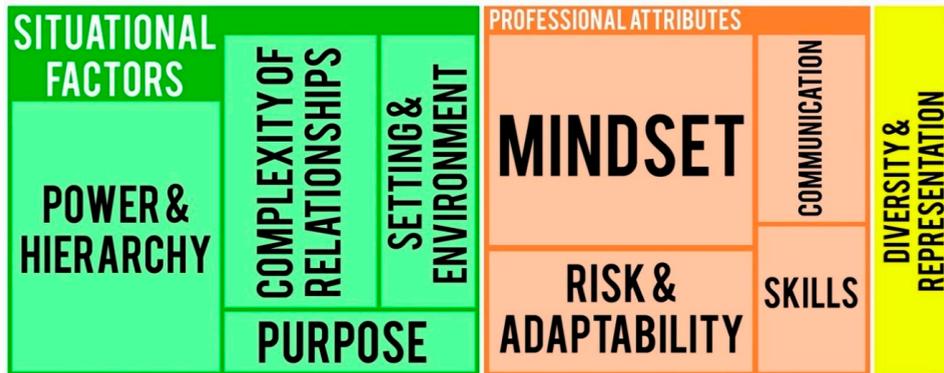


Figure 1. Focus group themes: coding density. Source: Graphic by author.

3.2.1. Situational Factors

Situational factors included developing an understanding of the setting itself; the different power structures within settings; the complexity of the different kinds of relationships involved; and having a clear understanding of purpose. In the following sections, I illustrate some of these issues by referring to either questionnaire responses (Q-x) or focus group comments (FG-x).

- Setting and Environment

One of the challenges of working in participatory settings is the need to adopt an approach which responds to the specific context. Rather than having pre-formed ideas about what might be achieved, this involves responding to the unpredictable and evolving environment of the participatory music workshop and the many factors which condition it:

You respond within the moment whatever happens in the moment. So it's knowing that you can't plan for what's going to happen. But knowing that actually, you're going to be challenged but also you believe that some way you will have the resources to be able to rise to that challenge and find the right way. (FG-7)

This issue of drawing on internal resources to meet the needs of the situation was also configured in the minds of some respondents as part of the performer–audience relationship:

The musician has a responsibility to the audience and the audience, particularly if it's a vulnerable audience, puts you in this position of responsibility where you have to rise to the occasion. (FG-3)

- Complexity of Relationships

For some respondents, these disruptions to the orthodox relationship between performer and audience were an artistic justification for their involvement in participatory settings, with one commenting, "I've always been drawn to musical situations in which the divide between performer and audience is blurred" (Q-8). The blurring of conventional performance boundaries was also described in situational terms, as another level of complexity requiring awareness, attention and reflexivity:

There might be some settings where there's a clear separation between performers and audience. And some settings where everyone's either participants or potential participants. And sometimes there are situations where people have to move fluidly between those. (FG-5)

Through the experience of shared music making, this blurring of performance boundaries also enabled musicians to encounter other people as unique individuals, rather than as "representatives" of a more homogeneous grouping such as an "audience member" or a "participant":

Sharing the experience of making music has allowed me to get to know people who I would probably not have otherwise met, which has generally been very rewarding. (Q-4)

This sense of musicking as a form of "bridging" social capital in order to "generate broader identities and reciprocity" (Putnam 2001, p. 23) was also discussed in terms of the personal motivations, values and capabilities of those who sought out this kind of musical experience:

I do feel that often community musicians, people who want to do this kind of thing, feel able to connect with other people and communicate music and musical ideas towards groups that other musicians who don't go into community music may feel unable to. (FG-4)

For some, participatory music provided opportunities to explore music from a very different perspective, as a "performance" of relationship, where the impact can be profound:

Understanding the impact this might have on you as a musician is understanding the complex way that relationships form within different musical settings. (FG-7)

- Power and Hierarchy

Within these diverse contexts, one common feature discussed was an awareness of the tension of power relations experienced in the participatory music workshop setting, especially where they challenged assumptions about hierarchy and leadership, or where they were about facilitating the creative ideas of other people rather than one's own:

Allowing for a true democracy in the group is something I've been challenging myself with all through my career. If I compare projects I run now with that first project I participated in while studying, I can feel quite proud of how much I devolve creative decisions to the group. This comes with confidence of course but I think a leader needs to be conscious of this choice and I'm not sure it's something that is being taught in conservatoires too much. (Q-8)

There's a big difference in saying as a participatory music facilitator, I am going into this space with these people and whatever comes out of it, comes out of it; as opposed to going in as a leader or a teacher and [having] a really planned idea of what you're going to do. (FG-2)

These more dialogic approaches might be especially challenging epistemologically for musicians whose professional expertise is based on values of discipline, precision and acting on clear instructions from others, e.g., a conductor. However, being able to participate in situations where power is distributed more equally across a group can also be empowering:

If you remove hierarchy from a social situation, you can potentially get chaos. But I think if you remove hierarchy and power, you also encourage freedom. The settings that I've felt like I've learned the most from are settings where I've felt on a par with the people who are educating me. (FG-5)

There was also a recognition that engaging in these more dialogic ways of being musical was helpful in developing a collaborative set of values and mindset which would be of direct use within a chamber context:

As chamber musicians you eliminate a hierarchy. As soon as you make that [performing] group smaller or you remove a conductor to make it chamber or there's three or four, everyone is the conductor, everyone is responsible. If you're engaging with participatory music you're encountering different ways of negotiating power and hierarchy, and that's going to give you different insights that might help you work more collaboratively with peers in the chamber system. (FG-5)

- Purpose

In the focus group in particular, there was much discussion about the idea of purpose and how it underpins the work in two important and related ways. Firstly, the idea that understanding the anticipated outcomes of the work is vital in shaping one's involvement in it was emphasised. If one of the ways in which community music might be understood is as "an active intervention between music leader or facilitator and participants" (Higgins 2012, p. 3), then understanding what is intended to be different as a result of the intervention shapes and conditions everything that happens in a setting:

Without purpose we wouldn't really have anything. We wouldn't be doing this. We wouldn't be doing workshops if we didn't have some kind of purpose in there, if there wasn't a purpose of being there. (FG-4)

Secondly, involvement in participatory music also contributed to musicians' "greater sense of purpose beyond yourself" (Q-9), with one commenting "it feels like it completes me as a musician" (Q-6). The development of a "logos" (Frankl 1946, p. 104), i.e., not just finding the purpose of a musical intervention but discovering more of the purpose of one's existence as a musician, is significant in understanding the powerful impact of this work on those who practice it:

I think there's probably something, not necessarily a simple thing, but some kind of complex web of stuff that links us all and the other people that do this kind of work. There might be things in our own musical practice that have shifted us into participatory settings. (FG-2)

3.2.2. Professional Attributes

Discussion around the attributes that are necessary to undertake this kind of work professionally—i.e., as a musician paid to facilitate such activities—centred around not just the development of specific contextual, pedagogical and communicative skills, but also on the psychological attributes such as mindset, resilience and adaptability, which enable responding authentically and reflexively in the moment to the complexity of participatory musical situations.

- Skills

Previous studies have highlighted the development of specific skills necessary to work in participatory settings, in terms of personal, interpersonal, musical, cognitive and teaching skills (Ascenso 2016), or the development of musical and pedagogical skills within specific participatory contexts underpinned by ethical values and critical reflection (Camlin and Zeserson 2018). Whilst acknowledging this wide range of

necessary skills, participants' discussion centred more around the importance of a "growth mindset", or "the belief that abilities can be cultivated" (Dweck 2012, p. 50), as an important attribute which enabled the development of those skills:

I think that that growth mindset thing resonates; within participatory music settings, I've got so much better as a musician from trying stuff that I just wouldn't have done before. (FG-2)

- Psychological Attributes

Psychological factors related to mindset and reflexivity were raised as factors in developing a capability for risk taking and adaptability.

This may be a generalisation, but I think there's a tendency for conservatoires to be more fixed mindset environments [with] the idea of talent [as something] you're just born with, not something you actually develop. But within community music settings I find that the reason why I felt so much more relaxed is maybe not because the music is any less good. It was just the fact that the peoples' mindsets are different—people were more [of a] growth mindset, "oh, how can I learn? How can I get this bit right? (FG-6)

I feel challenged in new ways with each new project, which I enjoy as I know I'm expanding as a person all the time. (Q-8)

Some of my most memorable musical experiences have come from volunteer or paid work in participatory settings. This work has often taken me out of my comfort zone, spatially, socially, emotionally and culturally, but these experiences have generally been positive and I think pushed me to be more adaptable and understanding in areas of life outside of work as well. (Q-4)

For me, it's personal risk. It's about doing things which feel less than comfortable. (FG-3)

- Musical Communication

A significant finding of this study was related to the impact that working in participatory settings can have on skills of communication, not just in terms of developing interpersonal communication skills, but also in terms of emotional communication through music. One participant shared a touching story about musical encounters in a care home which had a significant impact on their musicianship:

Working with people with dementia, I found it's really improved my memory of music and [emotional] communication as a musician because

it's forced me to look people in the eye when I play. I was playing for those suffering with dementia and played a medley of Elvis songs, and one man just started crying. It turned out that his wife had just passed away and that was "their" song. And so what I did, I was looking at him directly, I completely just focused more on the communication and didn't have to look at the music because I already had it in my head, it was easy. But I focused more on just looking at him and just going, it's okay. Let's play this for you and just feel what you want to feel [in] the moment, that's okay. And I feel that that has really [been valuable] as a musician, going into my final recital, that confidence to look people in the eye and just [play]. (FG-4)

Another echoed similar sentiments, in terms of the personal impact of similar encounters:

I believe that the closeness I have felt as I sing with someone at their hospital bedside, or when I resonate within a circle of improvising older women for whom singing is not a profession—these moments have changed me. I find I search out those moments more often than the one in which I sing until the applause arrives. (Q-8)

This important impact on musicianship can often be overlooked when thinking about work in participatory settings solely in terms of "giving something back" to society. In these encounters, the performance of music clearly becomes enhanced through the "performance" of relationship: "You keep that with you, that idea that I've played music that's really touched someone" (FG-7). In turn, this highlights a deep power of music through the "intent of connecting emotionally to the feeling of the piece" (FG-1) to facilitate a powerful emotional response in a listener/participant: "it's about acknowledging the audience, the responsibility that you have as a musician" (FG-3).

3.2.3. (Neuro)Diversity and Representation

An important aspect of working in participatory settings for some respondents was also related to the emphasis on individual difference and accounting for the unique personal identities of all those involved, including the musicians themselves. As one respondent with a neurodiverse condition expressed it, "all of our brains are wired in different ways. One person's brain is different from [another's], so it's good to have different personality types and different ways of learning that come into it" (FG-4). In the performance of relationships implicit within participatory music, being able to be seen and heard as a "unique, singular being" (Biesta 2006, p. 9) validates not just the experiences of participants, but the musicians as well:

As someone who has a learning difficulty and having a negative experience with school, my purpose is to ensure that children now are better cared for

in that moment that I have. Yeah. A part of my mental health is empathy.
(FG-6)

While the discussions in this study centred more specifically around the representation of neurodiversity, one might extrapolate that the performance of relationships implicit within participatory music provides a vehicle for the articulation and emergence of more marginalised identities in terms of gender, race, disability, class, age, sexual orientation and other individual identities “to enable people to find self-expression through musical means” (Bartleet and Higgins 2018, p. 3) and through the development of “cultural capabilities” (Nussbaum 2007; Wilson et al. 2017).

3.3. Stage 3—Secondary Analysis

Once the initial analysis of data had been undertaken using the pre-determined categories identified through the focus group, significant amounts of data remained uncoded. Accordingly, a secondary stage of analysis was undertaken to code and analyse these uncoded data, using an inductive coding approach with Nvivo software in order to allow themes and categories to emerge. This approach yielded four additional main themes with dependent sub-themes, which illustrated more of the complexity under discussion, as represented in the following tree map of the theme density (Figure 2).

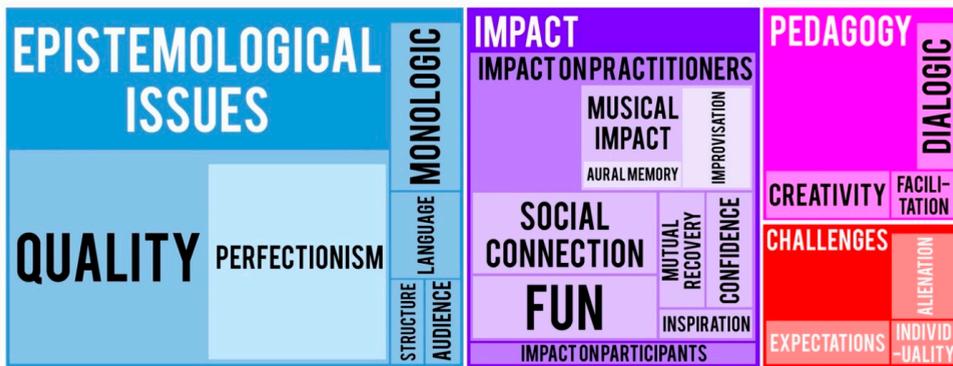


Figure 2. Emergent themes: coding density. Source: Graphic by author.

3.3.1. Epistemological Issues

The most significant of these complexities related to epistemological issues of “thinking differently” about music and what it “means” from the perspective of participation:

It’s given me an awareness of the importance of knowing how others see music, and that everyone experiences music differently; trying to understand that creates a better experience for all involved. (Q-2)

What this kind of work is doing is bringing you into contact with more of the complexity of what music actually is in the world. It's more than what you might get within a training environment, [where] it's very easy to stay in a box and be happy with that. In some ways it's terrifying but incredibly helpful. (FG-7)

- Quality

At the heart of these epistemological shifts is an awareness of the complexity of the notion of "quality" in musical contexts, which can be an especially tough shift to make for conservatoire students steeped in a culture of perfectionism. Elsewhere, I suggest that musical quality is contingent on its situation (Camlin 2015b, 2018), and it is in grappling with these contingencies that more of the complexity of musical quality is revealed:

As a professional musician, realising the actual impact of music rather than the strive for perfection [is beneficial]. I think that the quality is different. There is less dependency on getting every individual note absolutely perfect and it's more to do with the overall feel and yourself as an educator as opposed to your ability to play any flat in tune. (FG-6)

There was also a recognition that quality is understood in different ways in different musical situations:

I disagree with [participatory music] being lesser [and the idea that] you don't have to audition to be a community musician. You do. It's just different skills. You have to be able to entertain an audience as a community musician, you have to connect. You have to have the chops and to be able to connect—it's a different audition. (FG-3)

Similarly, there was also a recognition that these standards of quality are not fixed, but they vary as the context changes between more presentational and more participatory dimensions of performance (Camlin 2015b, 2018):

I think if you have [an] ensemble that get[s] together just for the community aspect or a bit of therapy or stress relief, that's got a very different dynamic to "okay we've got this community based ensemble, and we're all from the local area, but we've got a concert in three weeks. We need to deliver this concert. All of a sudden the dynamic changes because you're showcasing what you've got. You leave the safety of your space, your room. You're opening up to the public and everyone wants it to be good. (FG-7)

- Perfectionism

These epistemological shifts, from more “absolutist” perspectives toward a more “multiplist” or “evaluativist” understanding (Kuhn 2008, p. 31), are rarely easy to make and may be more challenging for conservatoire students simply because of the perfectionist culture within which they develop as musicians. We might think of this culture of perfectionism as a transparent medium rather like the water in Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant’s “fish in water” analogy, where the fish “does not feel the weight of the water, and takes the world about itself for granted” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 108). It is part of their everyday existence as musicians:

It’s also that level of prestige that you feel you have to live up to, like Royal Academy, Royal College. There’s that [sense of], the Queen’s watching me and you think, “oh, I better be good. (FG-4)

As Bourdieu and Wacquant elaborate, “because this world has produced me, because it has produced the categories of thought that I apply to it, it appears to me as self-evident” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 109). Developing an appreciation of music beyond a perfectionist paradigm can therefore be both challenging and liberating. Ironically, loosening the perfectionist grip and embracing wider notions of quality can also result in a creative freedom which in turn enhances performance:

As a perfectionist studying in an environment that is so focused on achieving a very high standard of performance, sometimes it can be difficult to remember that there are other ways of looking at music than attaining perfection. Studying participatory music and realising its powerful effect on others has freed me up creatively in my playing. It made me realise that there is a world outside of the perfectionist world that I sometimes live in. Participatory music has helped me to connect emotionally with audiences in my performances rather than always focusing on delivering a technically “perfect” performance. (Q-1)

This benefit to performance was recognised in other ways as well:

[Participatory music has] made me recognise my primary reason for performing it to provide an experience for both myself and the audience, reducing my anxiety about perfection and making me a more comfortable, happier performer. (Q-2)

Some acknowledged that being more attached to participatory and relational values rather than an aesthetic of performance “abstracted from those social relations” (Turino 2016, p. 303) led to more favourable outcomes in some settings:

I work with babies and two to three year olds. They do not care if they are on the beat. They're not going off and practising. They're literally just there because their parents have brought them or because they want to have fun. Perfectionism is something that's maybe relevant for some contexts and not for others. (FG-4)

The idea of quality as multi-faceted and contingent on its situation was also clear:

I think the idea of perfection is different for everyone. I conduct a community choir and for some in the choir, perfection is getting it perfect. For some in the choir, it's getting all the right words. For some in the choir, it's turning up, and that is a massive achievement regardless of what they sing. (FG-7)

Meanwhile, for others, the perfectionist ethic was also present in participatory settings:

I spend so much longer trying to get everything perfect with my non-auditioned people than I do with my auditioned people. The amateur people really want to be good, and they really work on it at home, so the word perfection is almost more in the room. (FG-3)

3.3.2. Challenges

When speaking of challenges, the participants tended to mention two types: the challenges faced within a participatory session; and a more subtle awareness of some of the challenges of alienation faced generally by musicians within the conservatoire system, and related to the perfectionist culture described above, that might be ameliorated by engaging in participatory music. This second kind of challenge will be discussed later.

Of the first kind of challenge, some are related to the complexity and "messiness" of human relationships which are activated through the work:

I have found there is often a tension between facilitators wanting to keep emotions out of the music session and this being an unrealistic expectation given the vulnerability of certain participants and the things music-making might bring up for them. It is challenging to provide emotional support for participants or manage conflict without derailing the session for other participants. (Q-4)

Others expressed it in terms of pressures arising from simply leading a session, or "always being needed by the participants" (Q-6), as well as pedagogical challenges:

Finding a suitable starting point that is inclusive of all participants. That is to say there is sufficient challenge, without it being too overwhelming, especially when there is a range of ages and abilities. (Q-5)

Some of the perceived challenges were more musical in nature, especially as they related to notions of score reading vs. aural learning:

I have found it difficult to adapt my practice to suit different groups—for example, if the group has no previous experience with musical notation. As a musician I am very much used to reading notes and am comfortable with musical terminology. Sometimes it can be difficult to know how to approach a session where musical jargon is not appropriate. (Q-1)

Relating to issues of quality and its contingency on situation, there were also challenges related to “reviewing and seeing progress: as we don’t work towards a performance it’s sometimes hard to see if we are making any progress and I need to become better at reviewing our sessions” (Q-3). None of these challenges were considered insurmountable. Rather, with a “growth” mindset, they might all “become less challenging with experience and learning” (Q-2).

3.3.3. Impact

When it came to discussions around impact, because the focus of the questionnaire was on the perceived benefits to the practitioners rather than their participants, most of the responses and subsequent discussion were around the impact on practitioners. However, at least some of that impact was expressed as an empathic appreciation of participants’ development and the inspiration that this brought:

The participants’ enjoyment and seeing their creative voice and ideas develop as the session goes on. Also how their confidence grows and individual characters open up due to their excitement. (Q-2).

Seeing the participants (and their parents/carers) grow in confidence and become more open-minded as the sessions continue, is a real inspiration. (Q-1)

- Fun

Closely related to this, the atmosphere of fun and enjoyment which characterises many participatory musical contexts was recognised as a significant part of what makes the work satisfying:

I enjoy working with young people, particularly early years participants as their behaviour makes me laugh and smile and gives me relief from what can be a challenging profession. (Q-2)

The willingness to explore music at the most basic level—enjoyment. I find that after these classes I am always smiling and the children are happy to try new things and ideas. (Q-3)

Being part of these projects has allowed me to see the fun in music again. I have had the chance to see people playing or using their voices in uninhibited ways, even under challenging circumstances and within the contexts of complicated lives. Seeing how much people enjoy making music and feel proud of what they can do is great, and it is very satisfying to observe changes in participants' confidence and skill over longer periods of time. (Q-4)

Again, these participatory settings were often contrasted with the perfectionist culture of the conservatoire, especially in terms of their accessibility and capacity for inclusion:

Being reminded of the enjoyment music can bring in a setting without the elitism and pressure of conservatoire. Cultural benefit of inclusion and social connections being made. (Q-2)

It reminds me that music is for all and to be enjoyed. Sometimes I forget this with the technical demands of playing. (Q-3)

- Social Connection

Respondents also spoke of the ways in which the development and “performance” of a range of different musical relationships impacted on them greatly:

The most rewarding thing is the personal joy that I get from connecting with people through music. Getting to know people, not necessarily through speaking to them, is fascinating. (Q-1)

I really enjoy working alongside similarly minded musicians who believe music should be accessible and enjoyable for as many people as possible. (Q-2)

- Mutual Recovery

Some talked about “alienation” from more formal practices as underpinning their motivation, and for them, involvement in participatory music practices was effectively a way of “recovering” some of their own mental health which they felt had suffered through the intense experience of conservatoire training:

As someone with a mental health condition, I find that it is just as beneficial for me as the participants. I get so much out of group music-making and through community music, I have been able to discover skills I have that I never thought were there. (Q-1)

Psychologically I find it reduces my anxiety as I am not constantly surrounded by the pressures and competitiveness of conservatoire and I have a setting where I can simply enjoy making others happy with my music and creating without pressure or strict constraints. (Q-2)

- Confidence

As one way of gently subverting the “hotshot” mentality of professional musicians who are “often brought up short when they begin playing chamber music [because] nothing has prepared them to attend to others” (Sennett 2012, p. 13), encounters with participatory music can reveal new psychological dimensions to being musical, especially in terms of general musical confidence:

Since being involved with participatory projects, I have noticed that my confidence as a musician has grown. I no longer feel the same need for perfection and I am much more likely to voluntarily join in with singing in other contexts. (Q-4)

- Musical

A key insight from this study was also the impact on practitioners’ own musicianship arising from involvement in participatory music. Being able to access the relational, participatory and fun dimensions of music in more presentational performances can be transformational:

Instead of aiming for a “musical ideal” in rehearsals at the cost of offending fellow musicians (something I’m ashamed of from my early years straight out of college!) I now focus on the social interactions and relationships with my colleagues—I believe this has made rehearsals a more positive experience for all and resulted in better musical communication—it also means that my current musical projects are not only musically fulfilling but are also built upon mutual respect and as a result I feel much happier in my career and I feel all the projects I’m involved in are now ‘going somewhere. (Q-9)

I am more comfortable performing: if you can persuade a room of 250 nurses to sing, an oratorio is a slightly less daunting prospect! (Q-6)

My ability to improvise parts or adapt parts is better, and [my ability to] loop around a section or whatever it is you need to accompany is much better from having led choirs. Specifically leading choirs makes me a better accompanist, and it makes me much better at feeling the speed and showing the pulse, knowing the pulse. (FG-3)

- Aural Memory and Improvisation

Again confirming previous findings (Ascenso 2016, pp. 21–22), there were specific perceived benefits to musicians' aural memory and improvisation skills:

This aural memory thing is really specific—it's a skill that you didn't have as a musician from three years of conservatory [training] but you got it from doing this; that's really pertinent. (FG-3)

I teach in Early Years settings. I have to memorise the music and I have to know how to improvise because it could mean, say when I want happy music now I have to go, 'yay, I'll play you some happy music.' So then I have to be able to improvise and I have to be able to memorise which is something that I've never had to do with college. So then it's something that I need to do. (FG-6)

3.3.4. Pedagogy

There were also clear pedagogical benefits of being involved in more andragogic/heutagogic approaches (Price 2013, p. 212) and being able to apply "pedagogical sensitivity" (van Manen 2008; Huhtinen-Hildén and Pitt 2018) to different situations (Mather and Camlin 2016), emphasising a much broader pedagogical attitude to musical development:

I particularly enjoy it when the participants have the confidence/know-how/skills to be able to work collaboratively amongst each other, so that I am less of a leader—more of a facilitator in a scaffolding kind of way. (Q-5)

4. Discussion

Taken together, the combined themes resulted in the following hierarchy map of coding density (Figure 3):

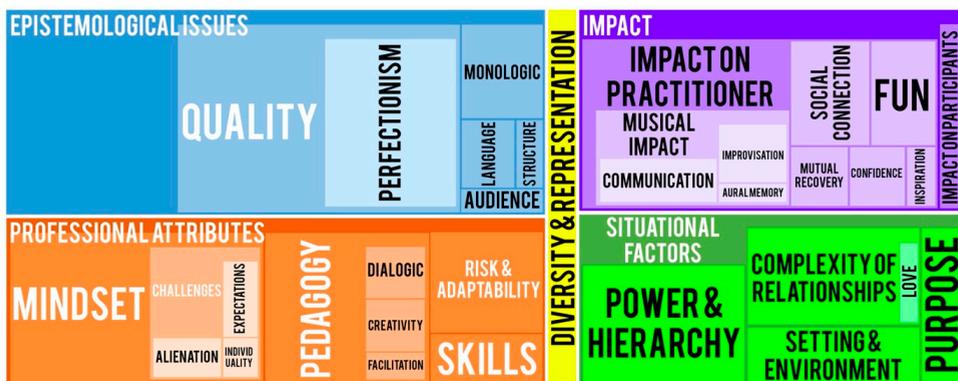


Figure 3. Combined themes: coding density. Source: Graphic by author.

In broad terms, the findings of this small study support the conclusions of previous research about the impact these kinds of encounters have on a musician’s identity, skills (personal, interpersonal, musical, cognitive and teaching) and wellbeing (Ascenso 2016, p. 4) in a variety of complex ways. A situational understanding of music—and an appreciation of the complexity of power and other kinds of relationships which underpin musical situations—encourages musicians to develop a more holistic understanding of music’s power and the range of benefits attributed to it (Hallam 2015). A range of professional attributes need to be developed in order to engage effectively with participatory music, including the development of practical, musical and pedagogical skills, and also psychological attitudes or mindsets in order to face and adapt to risks and challenges associated with the work. The impacts on musical confidence and personal wellbeing—as well as on aural memory and improvisational skills—can be considerable in terms of being able to “see the fun in music again” (Q-4) and apply the relational dimensions of musical communication back into one’s professional performance practice.

4.1. Shifts in Attitudes, Assumptions and Values

Of particular significance in this study is the way it highlights some of the epistemological challenges involved in thinking differently about music in order to make sense of and participate authentically in participatory musical practices. In focusing primarily on the experience of classically trained musicians at the start of their careers, this study demonstrated some of the shifts in mindset that are necessary to handle disruptions to more familiar monological structures of power and hierarchy which characterise the kind of formal musical learning found within conservatoire settings. Developing a more holistic understanding of music’s power is necessary to accommodate a broader appreciation of quality as contingent on situation and purpose:

It's crucial to understand the many different ways of being good at music, and to develop your own ability to share ideas. (Q-7)

Therefore, the epistemological shift described herein cannot be over-emphasised, both in terms of the challenge it represents and the potential benefits it can bring. Recognising the value of more dialogic modes of pedagogy and practice can be inspiring and emancipatory, but they can also destabilise a world view built on perfection, competition, monologic conceptions of quality and relationships characterised by power and hierarchy. However, inhabiting the kinds of "dialogic space" (Bakhtin 1981; Wegerif 2012; Camlin 2015a) which often characterise participatory music activity and encountering the creative freedoms and possibilities therein represent valid and useful preparation for a career in music, especially one with active involvement in chamber music contexts. With more of an emphasis on music as the performance of relationships, the importance of each individual voice (including the student's) in both musical and spoken exchanges emphasises the unique contributions that each member can make and highlights the value of the interplay between personal and collective expression.

Some of the focus group discussion centred around a challenge related to alienation, which we might theorise as relating to the pressures arising from being part of a "rational community" of music through membership of the conservatoire, where individual "insights and utterances become part of the anonymous discourse of universal reason" (Lingis 1994, p. 3). The realisation of musical "works" can be achieved with many combinations of musicians, all of whom are, to a greater or lesser extent, dispensable, and this can inevitably result in individuals feeling less actualised in terms of their potential. This contrasts with the kind of discourse outside of a rational community, i.e., the "community of those who have nothing in common" (ibid. p. 12), where the utterances of everyone present have equal value:

In the rational community our voice is a representative voice, while it is only in the other community that we speak in our own, unique and unprecedented way. This in turn means that it is only in and through our engagement with the other community, that is, in and through the way we expose ourselves to what is strange and other, that we come into the world as unique and singular beings—and not as instances of some more general "form" of what it is to be human. (Biesta 2006, p. 67)

For conservatoire students, this tension can manifest itself as a form of alienation, where the competitive culture of perfectionism can be debilitating. For some, musical situations outside of the conservatoire open up spaces where personal identity in music can be forged or strengthened:

Everyone feels some kind of alienation with the conventions of the professional musician world. And whether that's because of the instrument

they play or because of the environment they come from or because of the pressure that they feel, the feeling of not quite connecting with the conventional musician background is what draws people towards community music. (FG-1)

In a participatory setting, where the emphasis is on the performance of relationships, “who” is participating matters at least as much as “what” they are participating in. Through involvement in participatory settings, musicians can therefore develop more of a purpose to their musical identity because it very much matters that it is *them*—a unique and singular musical individual—who is leading the work.

This epistemological shift has clear beneficial impacts for those looking to develop their musical identities within chamber music contexts, where “who” is performing matters much more, and where the performance of relationship is absolutely essential to the realisation of musical works. The way that individual performers within a chamber context attune to and synchronise with each other in subtle musical and neurobiological ways in order to realise compelling performances is, at heart, a *relational* sensitivity. Participatory music is a clear training ground within which to develop such sensitivity, without the pressure of public performances judged solely on their capacity to fulfil the expectations of the “rational community” of the conservatoire.

There are, of course, many other benefits to involvement in participatory settings which go beyond musical impact. These “paramusical” or “more-than-musical” benefits (Stige et al. 2013, p. 298; Camlin et al. 2020, p. 2) include music’s positive impact on mood, identity and wellbeing as well as its affordances for social bonding. Respondents in the study identified the “fun” aspects of participatory music as musically and socially liberating and the relational aspects as profoundly inspiring, all of which point toward a more holistic appreciation of music’s power.

4.2. *Human Solidarity*

Beyond these considerations, participatory music settings also provide opportunities for certain kinds of freedom—freedom from the often debilitating culture of perfectionism; freedom to be oneself, and to be valued as such; and freedom to encounter participants as fellow human beings with diverse and unique personalities, creative aspirations, dreams and ambitions. Encounters with participatory music are also encounters with other human beings in the Arendtian sense of an encounter between “beginners”, i.e., people who “set something into motion” (Arendt 1977, p. 176). In this dialogic exchange between “beginners”—as we each articulate our personal truths through our musical expression—we reveal ourselves as “unique, singular beings [in a] world of plurality and difference” (Biesta 2006, p. 9). When one steps out of the conservatoire/concert hall and into

participatory settings, one encounters other human beings as unique and singular individuals too, rather than as interchangeable representatives of any broader “rational community”, and this changes all those involved in the participatory activity, especially the musician:

[Engaging in Participatory Music] not only makes you a better musician but it makes you a better musician by making you a better person. (FG-6)

I want my musical experience to be a situation in which I might interrogate the world about me. Participatory work allows me to do this. Performance without interaction is too allegorical; it is a comment upon life rather than an instance of it. (Q-8)

Due to the tendency to conceive of musical value primarily in terms of its aesthetic quality, the shift that conservatoire music students need to make in order to engage with participatory music authentically is, therefore, not just a practical one in terms of developing a range of new skills. It is also an epistemological shift, or a “break” with the world view of the conservatoire, which is as much about developing a complementary set of values to the ones customarily in use within the conservatoire system. In order to embrace music as a holistic practice, an emphasis on perfection needs to be transformed into an emphasis on positive and empowering relationships, and this requires a good degree of critical reflection in a supportive environment. The benefits of such an epistemological shift may also extend beyond developing competencies in participatory musical settings. The development of a more dialogic and relational mindset toward music making also represents an invaluable attitudinal shift which can help students transform the “hotshot” mindset of conservatoire training into something more collaborative, in preparation for taking up professional roles in chamber music practice.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: I wish to acknowledge the support of the Royal College of Music in providing ethical clearance for the study, in-kind contributions in the form of a room to host the focus group, and the critical feedback of academic colleagues on early drafts of this chapter.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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