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A hard day's night: Building sustainable careers for musicians

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Abstract

Traditional career theories are largely situated in organisations, where career trajectory is mostly an upward movement, usually associated with greater managerial responsibility and corresponding salary and benefits increase. With increasing growth in the creative economy and creative class, this article examines the complexity of creative work patterns and the associated skills required for sustainable musical careers. A longitudinal qualitative case-study approach documents the careers of eight professional musicians. Interviewees narrated their last decade through semi-structured interviews, which were analysed using thematic analysis. Findings suggest that musical careers are multifaceted and tend to have a lifespan effect. To remain sustainable, a base-line of well-maintained technical skills and musical expertise was a given, but a myriad of soft organisational skills was key.

Keywords: creative industries, career outcomes, musical careers, higher education, graduate outcomes

We confirm that there was no conflicting interest when conducting this research.

Introduction

‘Highly trained classical musicians bring an artistic, education, social and economic value to our society. The skills and expertise they gain through years of specialist coaching and training are of the highest order and easily transferable. But we still struggle to articulate and quantify the genuine value, joy and inspiration these specialist practitioners bring to people and society at large. It feels that we are somewhat bound by an unspoken hierarchy of what constitutes excellence and a ‘real job’ in the classical music sector. We need to get beyond the notion that classical musicians who don’t make it as performers must take the ‘second/third-best’ option as a teacher, community musician, creative workshop leader, music therapist, music administrator or even a career pathway outside the music / arts sector.’ (Gregory, 2015)

The U.K. has an enviable cultural reputation. According to the government’s Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS, 2017), the creative industries are worth £101.5bn, with contributions growing at twice the rate of the wider economy: 1 in 12 jobs are part of the creative economy relating to ‘music, performance and the visual arts’. Stokes (2021:363) writes that,

“the recent boom in cultural economy... (Florida, 2012) has pushed creativity from the margins to the centre of the economy (Lingo and Tepper, 2013) and created increasingly complex relationships between cultural production, business and politics, as local governments and policy-makers attempt to bolster economic prosperity through creative industries (Grodach, 2013)”.

Music specifically has a significant impact on the UK’s economy. UK Music’s ‘Measuring Music’ reports the following headline figures for the contribution of music to the UK economy in 2017: £4.5 billion gross value added (GVA) contribution to the economy; £2.6 billion total export revenue; 145,815 full time equivalent jobs are within the music industry (an increase of 3% from 2016) (Music Education: State of the Nation, 2019). With such growth and economic significance, understanding careers in the creative industries and specifically, amongst professional musicians is becoming an increasingly important and popular field of research (c.f. Bartlett et al, 2012).

At the point of writing, the Covid-19 pandemic has devastated global economies, whilst bringing greater awareness of the fragility of careers within creative industries. Research published in June 2020 by the Creative Industries Federation anticipated that the UK creative sector would be hit twice as hard as the wider economy in 2020, with a projected GVA shortfall of £29 billion. Despite government interventions (e.g. the furlough scheme), it is expected that 122,000 permanent creative workers will be made redundant, alongside the termination of nearly 300,000 freelance positions by the end of 2020 (Creative Industries Foundation, 2020). The pandemic has exposed even greater precarity and highlighted hidden and visible structural challenges within the creative industries (Comunian and England, 2020).

With such significant damage to this sector, it is crucial to understand the capabilities musicians need, to build vibrant and sustainable careers in the 21st Century (Bartleet et al, 2012). What do careers within professional music-making look like and how do musicians relate meaning and identity in carving a career path? In a timely call, Belfiore and Lee (2020:75) write that the impact of the pandemic urges us to review the “sustainability of cultural careers”. As Bartleet et al (2012) write, “life as a musician is complex and diverse, requiring skills and knowledge far beyond those that could realistically be offered within even the most informed, most applied formal music course.” It is therefore important to develop a greater in-depth understanding of the characteristics and dynamics of a musician’s work and career.

Professional musicians: careers, identity and skills

The Musicians’ Union published ‘the Working Musician’ (2012), outlining the importance of the music industry and its contributors. They suggest that there is no ‘typical musician’, with most adopting a portfolio career, encompassing a multitude of roles including teaching, performing and writing. Bennett and Bridgstock (2015) agree, characterising creative careers as “a messy concept”. Frenette’s (2016) research found that three-quarters of recent arts graduates in the United States were engaged in multi-disciplinary work. This aligned with Throsby and Zednick’s (2011) and Throsby and Petetskaya’s (2017) work that found it commonplace to work in hybrid markets where artistic endeavours are blended with other professions. In trying to understand careers in the creative industries, specifically that of musicians, it is prudent to briefly examine the traditional career literature.

Multiplexity of careers

Traditional career theories were situated in organisations, where within large hierarchical firms, career trajectory was an upward movement, usually associated with greater managerial responsibility and corresponding salary and benefits increase (e.g. Super, 1957; Hall, 2004;; Arthur, Claman, DeFillippi, 1995), many of which are now seminal pieces in the careers literature. Super (1957) was ahead of his time discussing the importance of developing a self-concept which changes over time and develops through experience. Later boundaryless and protean careers were introduced (Arthur et al, 1995). The boundaryless career focusses on the physical and psychological mobility of the individual; whereas the protean career is possibly more relevant to musicians, and focuses on motivation ‘to achieve subjectively-defined career success’...it

“depicts a career that is subject to frequent change through self-invention, and one that is characterized by autonomy, proactivity and self-direction. It is thought to be highly relevant in a volatile global economy and fits well with the emphasis on proactive and personal control over career development and employability” (Tomlinson, Baird, Berg and Cooper, 2018:9).

Since the introduction of boundaryless and protean careers, careers literature has focussed on individual agency. Arthur et al. (1995) suggested the term “intelligent careers” to encompass an individual’s effective management of their career: this includes the “*know why*” (values, attitudes, internal needs, identity, and life style); “*know how*” (career competencies: skills, expertise, capabilities; tacit and explicit knowledge); and “*know whom*” (networking, relationships, how to find the right people). Jones and DeFillippi (1996) added “*know what*” (opportunities, threats, and requirements), “*know where*” (entering, training and advancing), and “*know when*” to this model.

Moving on from boundaryless and protean careers, De Vos et al (2015:76) suggest the dynamic nature of contemporary careers requires a ‘lifespan approach’ for successful career maintenance. This approach responds to an individual’s changing needs throughout their life, whilst blending career, home and personal life. It addresses the securing of work across the lifespan, whilst acknowledging the wider economic and career context. Music-making occurs in many contexts (voluntary, freelance, contracted, as well as multiple environments) and within many ‘roles’ (performer, teacher etc). A lifespan perspective enables investigation into how identities associated with these roles and contexts interact and change at different time

points. Moen and Sweet (2004: 212) put forward the strong case for life course approach, arguing that

“the life course intersects with studies of work and organizational policy around the concept of ‘career.’ . . . What a life course perspective brings to both research and policy agendas is recognition [that]... occupational career building and family career building occur simultaneously, even though they are often studied and legislated about, separately.”

Tomlinson et al (2018:15-16) similarly wrote that, “[the] life course approach provides the underpinning mechanism to integrate individual agency with macro/institutional influences and micro/organizational policies and practices.”

De Vos et al (2020) conceptualised sustainable careers to include three key indicators: health, happiness and productivity, together with three key dimensions useful for studying sustainable careers: person, context and time. De Vos noted further work was needed to understand better both intra- and inter-individual changes over time. In this article, we attend to the intra-individuals’ changes over time and consider the impact of changes within in our respondents’ personal or other contexts. Furthermore, we wished to understand better Stokes’ (2021) observations of cultural workers’ portfolio careers within our sample of professional musicians.

Comprehensive studies conducted by Bennett (2008a, 2008b) and colleagues (e.g. Bartleet et al, 2012; Bridgstock et al, 2015), found that creative careers are complex and diverse. Although some authors write about the benefits of portfolio careers being liberating and adaptive (e.g. Morgan et al, 2013), others find that creative workers are often driven to portfolio working arrangements through financial necessity or industry norms and configurations (in the creative industries, much work is project-based and of finite length) (Bridgstock et al, 2015). McDowall et al (2019) specifically highlighted the impact of caring responsibilities on career progression in the performing arts.

With increasing complexity and globalisation of business and labour markets, we argue that musicians are some of the original portfolio careerists (working across genres, within different sectors, in a range of roles (The Working Musician, 2012)). Beyond key accounts in the vocational literature (cf Bennett, 2008a), there is limited information about careers in the music

industry (Dobrow et al, 2017), especially with regard towards future employability beyond higher education work programmes.

These perspectives illustrate the complexity in understanding professional music-making and the need to consider careers through a life span portfolio perspective, where intersections of organisational level practices and policies collide with individual level contexts such as age, gender, and culture.

Multiplexity of identities

Identity is intrinsically linked to a musician's career. Their identity is complex because of its subjective and objective elements, and the personal values that musicians place on different aspects of their work. Mills (2004) writes that musicians' 'professional identity' is their job title, a facet of their objective career. Yet the reality is more complex: musicians may earn their income from instrumental teaching, but may be reluctant to hold the identity of a teacher; instead seeing themselves as a performer. Musicians have a complex, subjective identity, not necessarily related to the time spent nor financial rewards gained. In the public's consciousness, being a musician is equated with being a performer; creating calls to redefine musician-hood (Bennett, 2008b). Polifonia (2007:13) suggest the industry has changed because of the social and economic developments in the consumption of music; "while fewer long-term employment jobs in the traditionally secure areas such as orchestras and full-time teaching are available... short-time employment and freelancing are on the increase". Therefore, a musician's sense-of-self must dramatically readjust to thrive within contemporary labour markets. With the exception of Bennett (2008a), these calls have not thoroughly examined the values placed on and embedded in 'being a musician' within our identities, and how these values change as a natural part of life course and career changes.

Albert et al (2000) noted that with changing employment contracts and greater proliferation of boundaryless and portfolio careers, there will naturally be greater number of instances of identity transformation over the course of a life course. Ibarra (2004) proposed that having developed a strong work identity around a particular strength or expertise, to assume a new professional identity is "rarely a simple matter of adaptation to an existing and easily observable role but rather a process of identifying or creating one's own possibilities" (p.2).

Multiplexity of skills

Bridgstock and Hearn (2012) have identified four ‘meta-capabilities’ for career success among twenty-first-century creative professionals. These are: disciplinary agility; social networking capability; creative enterprise; and career self-management.

Disciplinary agility points to the creative individual’s ability to bridge disciplines, activities and genres. For example, playing multiple instruments (eg. Tenor and Alto trombone), or being able to play West End pit bands or for on-stage Royal Shakespeare Theatre ensembles. *Social network capability* points to the ability to develop and maintain social networks in a strategic yet authentic manner. For example, posting regularly on social network platforms about the success of creative activities. *Creative enterprise* refers to the skills related to taking advantage of creative opportunities when they occur. These include spotting opportunities which may not at first glance appear to be relevant, eg attending events with the aim of networking, so that when an opportunity arises an individual is first to be contacted. *Career self-management* refers to the ability to obtain and create employment opportunities for oneself, success within this domain depends on the information one has on one’s self and one’s current world of work.

Employability skills training in tertiary institutions

There is a mismatch in number of specialist music tertiary institutions readying students to graduate into performing world, and the work available after graduation (Bennett and Bridgstock, 2015). However, there is nothing to say that there are no further opportunities that are co-located within adjacent job types, as Higgs and Cunningham (2008) put it in their Creative Trident Model, which categorised the different types of employment people might be engaged in within creative industries, and helpfully clustered people into three types of employment: ‘specialised’, ‘support’ and ‘embedded’. ‘Specialists’ were creatives working directly in the creative industries; ‘Support’ were staff in creative industries providing management or administrative support; and ‘embedded’ referred to individuals working in other industries not defined as ‘creative’. Rogers (2002:4) sees musicians occupying a “series of roles different from, and broader than, the act of performing or composing”, a definition that helps to move away from the musician solely as performer. In the Working Musician (2012), musicians suggested they “develop[ed] skills to sustain their portfolio careers beyond those associated with being a musician such as, business, marketing, teaching and community engagement skills. Above all they need to be adaptable.” (p10). Recently, López-Íñiguez and Bennett (2020) suggest that these essential professional capabilities should be emphasised in the core curriculum of higher music education.

Musical career success – multifaceted and creative

Musical careers are multifaceted entities requiring a multitude of skills, far more than the professional expertise of being able to play an instrument to an expert and professional level.

As an industry, professional musicians are produced in greater numbers than amount of work available as professional performers. However, within the sphere of ‘doing music’ and ‘being a musician’ there is a myriad of related work and opportunities, which, once the relevant competencies are developed either through tertiary education or self-development, become part of a musician’s professional identity(c.f. Bennett, 2008a).

In this article, we look closely at the motivations and competencies of eight conservatoire trained musicians, who work across orchestras, big bands, west end bands, as well as various educational roles. We address the gap raised by Bartleet et al (2012) regarding the “complexity of creative work patterns” and the “skills for a music portfolio career” by asking the following questions: 1. What do careers within professional music-making look like? 2. How do musicians craft their careers over their lifespan? And 3. What factors lead to sustainable successful careers within the creative sector?

Methodology

Methodology context

This study documents the lives and careers of 8 professional musicians in the UK over a decade. Longitudinal research explores the idea of change over time. Typically, UK longitudinal studies are ‘cohort studies’ (eg. ‘The English Longitudinal Study of Ageing’ ELSA (<https://www.elsa-project.ac.uk/>)). These capture change over time with repeated standardised closed questions, providing multiple data sets for cohort analysis of behaviour change at a population level. Less used within the Psychological sciences is a longitudinal qualitative case-study approach, where we capture a depth of change over time for individuals, which provide a narrative perspective on the nuances of experience, and are then contextualised to develop new ideas about a problem.

Longitudinal qualitative case-studies are increasingly used in social policy research, for the following reasons, much of which is relevant for us as psychologists in examining artistic careers:

‘policy-makers are seeking to understand what factors are important in determining choices and behaviour. There is also a growing theoretical interest in people as active agents, constructing their own biographies and lifecourse, in the context of particular social and economic constraints. Having people look back over time can provide insight into how they perceive and explain their actions, given the opportunity to discuss and reflect. Following people forward over time provides an opportunity to explore how and why people make the individual choices that add up to particular cumulative trajectories.’ (Corden and Millar, 2007, P.529)

Our work is strongly influenced within psychology by contextualism and case-study approaches. Yin (2002) defines case-study as “a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between a phenomenon and context are not clear and the researcher has little control over the phenomenon and context” (p. 13). Pettigrew (1985) adopted an epistemology called “contextualism” and took the view that “empirical observations and the knowledge derived from them as unavoidably bound up in when and where they occur. These observations capture events whose meaning can only be grasped by referring to the sequence of which they are a part, in combination with the setting in which they take place” (Sminia, 2016:115). Similarly, De Vos et al (2020) discuss the importance of context as a key dimension that can help to analyse and study careers.

Methods

Snowball sampling (Noy, 2008) drew together 8 professional freelance and salaried musicians from across the UK. 8 musicians took part in semi-structured interviews a decade apart 2005-2007 (time one) and 2017-2018 (time two). At time one (2005-2007) we took a snapshot of their musical lives (REDACTED) and we followed their career journeys via a second interview at time two (2017 – 2018). All musicians were freelance brass players, trained at UK conservatoires. They have since pursued varied careers within the industry (table 1) including orchestral, big band, west end, soloist and educational work.

Each interview was approximately 1 hour long at each time point. During the first interviews, most musicians were aged between 24-30 years with the exception of one in their forties (table 1); most were therefore in their early career post-training phase, and one in a mid career phase. During the first interview, musicians discussed their lives as musicians, their musical and social identities, their performance practice, and their hopes for their future careers.

At time 2, musicians narrated their last decade of ‘being a musician’ through semi-structured interviews focussing on broad vocational concepts: careers (e.g. the role of organisations, notions of loyalty, understanding of stability, and the perceived availability of work); social spaces (e.g. life beyond work, organisational factors affecting development); and adaptability and sustainability (e.g. what is an adaptable / sustainable career).

The questions developed after analysis of time one data, to account for and expand on notions of the lifespan effect. In defence of adopting a lifespan approach to our data we turn to Sugarman (2004:2) who writes,

“To live is to change. This truism is implicit in the notion of life-span development. We are each palpably different from the person we were 10 years ago and the person we will be in 10, 20, or 30 years’ time. Life-span developmental psychology is concerned with documenting, explaining, and influencing these changes. Hence two time points of data collection within this study.”

Given the shift in questions and new focus of the research towards generating further detailed perspectives on career sustainability, it is clear that this work was not initially created as a piece of longitudinal research. However, the breadth and scope of the initial project was such that it could be easily developed with forethought towards the spaces that careers are adopting in the creative industries.

Ethical approval was sought from the supervision team for time one, and the departmental ethics board at time two. Informed consent was provided by each participant prior to their taking part in the interviews. Interviews were analysed in Nvivo using a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clark, 2006), to develop super-ordinate and ordinate themes. To ensure confidentiality, participants were given pseudonyms.

Results and Discussion

Participant overview

Table 1 provides a brief narrative overview of the life stories of each participant.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

1. What do careers within professional music-making look like?

From literature and understanding the portfolio nature of professional musicians, participants distinguished between financial payoffs and ‘feel good’ payoffs when discussing their careers.

Explaining his passion for his freelance career, Ben said,

‘Reflecting on the last ten years, I’ve [chosen] work that brings in income. There are just a few gigs that have been very artistically satisfying, and they’re mainly educational ones. I really enjoy those because you’re working with young musicians. I get a lot out of educational work. Also teaching, I feel like I’m making a difference. The show world is wonderfully satisfying in so many ways, in terms of getting the notes right, et cetera, but it is a financial thing. The reason people go into shows is that it’s stable income. Not because they have a deep-seated love of the music. 800 shows in... well quite, (laughs) lets discuss why I have a portfolio career.’

Phil shared the sentiment and said,

‘You can be an absolutely astonishing bebop player or an astonishing folk player, but those sectors may not bring in large amounts of money or there might not be adequate work to keep you in a job. So you have two choices: you either spread the load wider and play different styles of music, or you choose to play the music that you want to play, and do something else to bring the money in. They’re essentially the choices, the balancing act. There’s also the choice, the balancing act between gigs which are financially rewarding but not artistically so, and the gigs that are artistically very rewarding and not financially so. And so balancing those ones as well.’

This tension between financial viability and artistic creativity, or reward beyond the financial resonated with many of the other interviewees. This in part relates to Bennett’s (2008a, 2008b) view of musicians and a lifespan career path. Unlike the typical careers literature which discusses the process of stabilising once an individual reaches their 30s/40s, there is less certainty of job security within the artistic fields. From their early twenties and into their thirties, musicians recalibrate their expectations of what a musical career ‘ought’ to look like, particularly within the mix of one’s life choices (e.g. family life and caring opportunities). There is a sense that a financially rewarding gig may not always be artistically rewarding and

vice-versa, and so rewards may have to be found through diversification within the career (solo projects, further education, entrepreneurship, teaching etc.). There appears to be a tension between money and gigs, but also creativity and work. Thomson (2013) writes that entrepreneurial skills are now considered ‘prerequisite’ for entry and continued employment in the creative sector.

There is also a tension in the transitioning identities over the lifespan. Our interviewees talked about doing work that “make a (positive) difference” such as teaching young people, but also the need to retain their professional identity as professional musicians who are expert performers. This resonates with Stokes (2021)’s work on the need to reframe these tensions where she suggests that cultural workers can experience these art-commerce tensions as “simultaneously conflicting and complementary”, where respondents “simultaneously expressed commitment to artistic values *and* economic pragmatism, to generalism *and* skilled specialist expertise”.

2. How do musicians craft their careers over their lifespan?

Implicitly in all our interviews, there was talk about building up of a multitude of skills outside of expertise in particular instruments and genre. This was seen as a necessity to survive.

Musicians shape their careers through a variety of sources and networks. These include social media, formal networks (diary services) and informal or hidden networks. This points to what Bridgstock and Hearn (2012) refer to as ‘social networking capability’. Our interviewees commented that work was gained through ‘word of mouth’, Sharon outlined it as follows;

‘You’ve gone in somewhere and you’ve done a good job. Somebody else asks you. That’s exactly how it works. That’s how it’s worked for me. It’s just word of mouth. You know, and I’m no flash git. I’m just a Steady Eddie....’

Her comments point not only to the need for musical skills (i.e. ‘done a good job’) but also the interpersonal skills needed – being dependable, being friendly etc. There are key individuals within the music business who book musicians - Musical Directors (MDs) or Fixers. Often these will ask existing musicians within an organisation for their recommendations

‘... was booked by the MD, who asked friends, “Who do you want to work with?” So that’s how the band was booked. So [redacted] “Oh, I wouldn’t mind working with Sharon again,” ‘

When asked how they thought Fixers might work, Phil suggested:

‘I’ve got no idea, to be honest. But I think they’ve got a list of every instrument, and their list isn’t always the list of the best players; it’s a list of the players that are most reliable as well. I think that’s taken into account. And also how fast you are at responding to stuff.’

Again, this comment illustrates an acceptance that individuals will be technically proficient to undertake work, and it is other qualities which make the musician, for example, ‘creative enterprise’, and ‘discipline agility’.

There are socio-cultural norms surrounding getting work. Those who felt they were settled into their careers suggested that they weren’t the type of people who needed to informally network at the pub, Ben said:

‘There’s a real thing about being seen in the pubs between shows on a Saturday, just because it reminds everyone that you exist. I’m not very good at that, because I don’t necessarily like drinking between shows on a Saturday, but...’

Drinking has traditionally been embedded within this specific UK working culture, and yet there was also a sense that this culture is changing too, Sharon said; *‘We are a tea drinking band, may have one after, but never before a show.’* Others have suggested that Fixers are changing who they are booking, wanting to book ‘younger non-drinking bands’ (Ben and Sharon).

There were also generational cultural differences, with those in their thirties suggesting that social media provides a different type of platform for younger musicians, with Ben commenting that

‘It’s nice to occasionally put [on Facebook] “Doing this gig in this location today” but I don’t do it a lot, because I know how people react to that’.

Social Media is a double-edged sword; for some in their thirties there was a sense of negativity towards notions of blatant online self-promotion. Yet younger colleagues were reportedly finding success through significant online self-promotion - a consequence of which was that, as Alan said, "*he's never been busier*".

All musicians held the same ambition in their early 20s of gaining a position in an orchestra, Phil said;

'When I was out of college, my dream was to get a job in an orchestra. That was absolutely what I was striving for...shortly after, I started looking at other types of music. The British music scene is changing, and I realised my skillsets were quite well suited, so I changed [my ambitions].'

There is a sense that 'being an orchestral musician' was what '*music college seemed to prepare you for*' (Alan). However, Phil's excerpt suggests that over the lifespan perspective, skill development and time enabled one to reflect on the context, perceived availability of work, and their own existing skill set and to adapt to opportunities. To be flexible in fact appears to be a key to success.

Excerpts so far illustrate that social skills are of primary importance in musical careers, and that the musical expertise, which one might perhaps consider to be the primary skill, are actually a given upon entering and being accepted into the industry. These social skills may or may not be able to be taught or learnt. Tony says,

'Doing that for a job [being a good musician] requires two things. It requires a separate constellation of skills that allow you to deal with the realities of doing it for a job: the organisational factor, logistics, the social side of getting on with people – the vast majority of bookings that take place, certainly in my experience, have come through people that you know rather than doing audition. And even if you do do an audition, you still have to be liked by the people you work with.'

Such comments resonated with Arthur et al.'s (1995) and Jones and DeFilippi's (1996) propositions of intelligent careers and the 6-Ks (know why, know how, know whom and know what, know where, know when). In understanding the importance and central role of networks in contemporary career development, successful musicians show their ability to adapt to holding a portfolio career and embracing new ideas in pursuing, celebrating, and developing

careers. As Stokes (2021:364) writes, “because of changes in the structure of 21st-century labour markets, portfolio careers and relationships between culture, economics and politics, these workers no longer fit within traditional positions or ideals of their fields”.

3. What factors lead to sustainable successful careers within the creative sector?

Musicians considered a range of factors that supported sustainability and success in the industry.

A. Continuous improvement and maintaining standards

“One thing that’s really important is keeping your desire to get better. Where it goes for a lot of people is they stop practising. They stop being driven. I have seen it all over the place, at the back of orchestras, people just going through the motions.” (Anna)

This quote points to the need for continuous improvement and for self-motivation, to keep taking the next gig or performance opportunity. Others felt that one needed to be ‘good enough’ and maintain personal standards (in playing and social skills) in order to have a sustainable career. Freddie noted, *“I just try to turn up and be good at what I do. I think that’s enough to make a sustainable career, because if people have ears and hear that it’s good, then I will keep getting that work. If you maintain those standards, you will do well.”*

B. Complexity of portfolio career as a key to success and the role of networks

To demonstrate the complexity of a musician’s career, Phil describes the management of the multitude of options and opportunities, saying;

‘Logistics-wise, it means that I play [instr 1], I play [instr 2]; I play in orchestras and I play in jazz bands; I record stuff; I teach brass instruments, I teach at the university; I run music workshops for beginners, I run music workshops in prisons, run music workshops all over. So that’s the kind of bottom line of what I do, is a bit of – lots of everything, basically.... something that’s playing on my mind a little bit at the moment anyway is the fear of becoming a jack of all trades, master of none’.

Phil expands on this by describing a ‘typical’ day:

*“Two weekends’ time I’m playing – playing *The Dream of Gerontius*, with [national opera company]. But before that, I’m doing a kiddies’ concert at [central London venue], and then in between that I’m doing a gig at a [private members club in the city]. So I’m doing – doing a kiddies’ concert, a New Orleans jazz gig, and [hesitates] an opera gig, on the same...DAY!”*

Freddie explores the role of formal and informal networks in carving out a career in the arts, saying;

“After ten years of working, – I guess I’ve got lots and lots of kind of different [hesitates] contacts in the business anyway that use me on a regular basis, so, you know, whether it’s orchestral stuff – you know, orchestral fixers know who I am. Know that I’m the best in my price range, you know, so if they’ve got something coming up, they’ll ring me...” He continues, *“I work extensively for [a central London venue]. They trust me a lot, so I’ve got lots of repeat gigs, but I’ve also got – if there’s a new project that they want to set up, they’ll speak to me first, to get my ideas and thoughts on it, which is quite nice.”*

There were numerous success stories of formal networking through key individuals within training programs and later careers, including college tutors, MDs and fixers, as well as informal networking (meeting at social occasions after performances, meeting through mutual friends at music performances, and word of mouth). There was an implicit suggestion that to improve the viability of a career through getting more bookings and more job offers, one needed to be a ‘good egg’ in order to be remembered positively, gaining further recommendations, again relating to the ‘creative enterprise’ (Bridgstock and Hearn, 2012) aspect of skills.

Each musician’s career is a complex web of job, interpersonal, musical, and social demands. These narratives have illustrated the need for disciplinary agility and that flexibility and adaptability required across these domains is extensive, with musical ability and sociability at its heart, as is a capacity for self-reflection upon one’s career.

C. The role of the college in career preparation

The overwhelming view from all interviewees was that higher education technically prepared them well in terms of instrumental skills: graduating from conservatoires with expert levels of

skills in their respective instruments, usually centred around producing graduates with many of the competencies, but often all of the ambition, to become an orchestral musician. However, there was a unanimous view that there was little formal or informal teaching about the life and careers of musicians, the development of the softer skills and that the realities of the profession in their 30s were markedly different from their expectations in their early 20s. There was minimal discussion about branching out from the idea of ‘being an orchestral musician’, and yet the reality of freelancing was so much more than that skill set. There was also minimal discussion of alternative careers beyond simply performing, or the preparation and understanding of transferable skills. This is a similar view to other expert jobs and careers, for example academia or professional sports, where often the skills are learnt within the job and the work is crafted by the individual to suit their own needs.

As Freddie lamented,

“Why no one in careers advice said, “Do you know what? There are 16 jobs in the entire UK. Do you really want to do that?” And I think there are only 14 now, you know.”

Having said that, Phil felt that *“my conservatoire education in general was a really good one, certainly in terms of preparing you for the high standards of what’s required as a musician, and the realisation that you’re going to have to put a lot of work in, over a lot of years, you know? It also touches on – touched on different ideas of different revenue streams you could look into. I think it was – you know, it’s where I started doing, looking into music education, was at the conservatoire. But, I mean, the priority was definitely orchestral performance or solo repertoire performance.”*

Musicians felt that conservatoires that provided such high level of technical education ought to also provide some semblance of career coaching and advice. There was a general feeling that given the niche and specialities of some of the instruments, there would be very few jobs located at specific cities in the UK. Perhaps there should be an alternative careers option for those who don’t make or choose not to go into the ‘premier league’ of the music world. For example, in the professional sporting world where sportsmen and women take early retirement to pursue related careers like coaching, managing and media commentating, perhaps more should be made about alternative but music-embedded careers. There was also a vocal call for

the understanding of transferable skills, where skills honed within a musical career can be transferred to alternative careers successfully.

Such a unanimous view echoes the call from Bartleet et al (2012) that research is required to investigate how to meet the skill and capability needs of the embedded music workforce. López-Íñiguez and Bennett (2020) recently wrote that many higher music education institutions have since embraced significant curricular and pedagogical change and similarly, we note that this article's experiences of our sample were largely in the past.

Conclusions and recommendations

This article took a longitudinal case-study approach to offer a unique insight into understanding sustainable careers in the music industry. We began to address urgent research agendas (Bartleet et al (2012)) in developing greater understanding of portfolio music careers in the UK, as well as the factors that influence the ability of portfolio musicians to create sustainable work practices.

When we asked what careers within professional music-making looked like, we found that contrary to contemporary careers literature, the realities of a musical career are far from these structured expectations. Instead they relate to elements of boundaryless and portfolio working but with a sense of the self and personal identity and our lifespan point as being core to our career success. Specifically, we found that the view of a portfolio career within a creative industry was one of *concurrent* multiple job roles as opposed to the more mainstream view of a series of short-term roles. This was clearly how successful musicians crafted their careers over their lifespan. This has impact on the type of meta-competencies the musicians have to develop over and above their expertise and knowledge about their particular musical instruments. We found that although high level technical knowledge, skills and expertise were expected of all professional musicians (one needs to be able to play in an orchestra or a band), there was a clear need for other softer skills such as the ability to network both formally and informally, be entrepreneurial as well as use forms of social media as a method of modern day promotion. Perhaps a sustainable career within the music industry requires the following elements: awareness of self and musical identity(ies), ability to (practically, emotionally, financially) handle concurrent multiple job roles, hard and soft skill sets which can adapt to a

range of environments and demands, as well as a clear baseline of expert knowledge which can be adapted to specific contexts.

As López-Íñiguez and Bennett (2020:1) suggest, “essential professional capabilities should be emphasised in the core curriculum of higher music education.” We would strongly urge tertiary institutions engaged in creative sector education to look into this matter and design programmes that offer a more rounded education linked to both developing employability as well as expert skills. Taking on board Higgs and Cunningham’s (2008) Creative Trident Model of clustering creative industries employment into ‘specialised’, ‘support’ and ‘embedded’, it would be useful for tertiary institutions to engage with the multitude of potential creative industries related career opportunities so that graduates are able to embark on meaningful careers utilising their highly specialised training and knowledge.

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Table 1: Vignettes of 8 participants

Participant (pseudonyms)	Vignette
Sharon	<p>Sharon is a female trombone player in her fifties. She is married to a professional bass player. She has worked on West End shows for the last twenty years, and is contracted to a particular show. She has recently undergone some dramatic career changes since her husband was diagnosed with a life-limiting illness.</p> <p>Her interview focussed on gender, work in a male-dominated industry, freelancing / contract work.</p>
Ben	<p>Ben is a male trombone player in his late thirties. He is married to another musician who is now a teacher, and they have recently had a child. He has worked on West End shows, within the session world (TV, radio etc) and tours with large ska, punk, soul and electro ensembles, and is also undertaking a PhD in music.</p> <p>His interview covers many ideas about the networks and dynamics of working in the industry, and concepts of being a musician.</p>
Phil	<p>Phil is a male tuba player in his mid-thirties. He has a freelance career dividing his time between many different jobs or roles, but has a specialism in educational outreach work.</p> <p>His interview covers many ideas about networks, career progression, sustainability, and work life balance.</p>
Alan	<p>Alan is a male trumpet player in his early thirties. He is married to another musician who now works in healthcare and has a freelance career in the music industry. He divides his time between teaching and freelance performing.</p> <p>His interview covers many ideas about family being central to his career, musical identities, and maintain health within a career.</p>

Tony	<p>Tony is a male trumpet player in his mid-thirties. His partner is not a musician. He has a freelance career in the industry. He divides his time between teaching and freelancing, with the majority of his time performing as a freelancer. His interview is quite political and career / education focussed.</p>
Anna	<p>Anna is a female horn player in her mid-thirties and has a contracted position with one of the main UK orchestras.</p> <p>She recently had a baby. Her partner is Freddie.</p> <p>Her interview discusses the transition into motherhood and how that affects her career. She also talks about the reality of being a woman working in a man's world.</p>
William	<p>William is a male trombone player in his mid-thirties. His partner is an ex musician and now works in healthcare. He has a full time contracted post with a major UK orchestra and holds freelance positions outside of that. His interview is quite musicological and music industry based.</p>
Freddie	<p>Freddie is a male tuba player in his mid-thirties, his partner is Anna and they have recently had a baby. He solely freelances (no teaching or contracts).</p> <p>His interview focusses on the freelance lifestyle and nuances of that type of portfolio career, as well as the changes that having a family has brought to his career.</p>