

## **“It's too hard to break into when you haven't got the money”: Career Prospects of Undergraduate Conservatoire Music Students**

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### **Research Domains**

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

### **Abstract**

Cuts to music education have not been felt equally, leading to concerns that access to music will only become available for the privileged few. This research was carried out with undergraduate music students at two UK conservatoires between 2022-2023 involving an online questionnaire (n=54) and nine semi-structured interviews. Students' access to high level music education, prior to studying at the conservatoire, played a significant role in their experiences, and three themes emerged regarding how the conservatoire influences students' future career decisions; firstly, the conservatoire opened doors for many students to new career opportunities, secondly, students' success at the conservatoire helped to reinforce their convictions to become a professional musician, and finally, for some it made them doubt the viability of music as a career. Financial and job security were major concerns, especially for students without economic capital, raising serious concerns for the accessibility of the classical music industry.

### **Full paper**

Music conservatoires are specialist higher education providers, of which there are nine in the UK. Access is through audition whereby a high level of musical proficiency is expected (Burt-Perkins and Mills, 2009). With significant cuts to music education, there are concerns that access to higher music education will only be accessible for the privileged few. Music conservatoires act as gatekeepers to the classical music industry, therefore inequalities in education filter down into industry (Arts Council England, 2014). In 2018, only 15 out of 430 (3.5%) conservatoire entrants were from a 'highly deprived background' (Daubney, Spruce and Annetts, 2019: 17) and Blamey, Kokot and Scharff (2014) found that only 3.9% of conservatoire students came from areas of low higher education participation neighbourhoods. Despite this, class inequalities do not 'appear to be current priorities for EDI [equality, diversity and inclusion] work in music HE' (Bull et al., 2022: 143).

Situated at a transitional period of a musician's development, this study sought to understand the experiences and career aspirations of undergraduate music students from state-school backgrounds and

who had faced financial barriers to accessing music education. Data collection took a two-staged approach with two UK conservatoire institutions during 2022-23. Firstly an online survey collected 54 responses (42 from institution A, and 12 from institution B), with the majority (75.9%) having attended a state secondary school. Interviews were based off the interview participants from state school background and/or who had expressed financial barriers to their music education. Taking a purposive maximal sampling approach (Simons, 2009), 9 students took part in interviews totalling 305 minutes, with an average length of 34 minutes.

Categorisations of class are complex and often contested (Carey, Florisson, O'Brien and Lee, 2020). Bourdieusian theories of class are drawn upon in this research, whereby capital (economic, cultural, social and symbolic) indicate markers of class and are used to navigate within a field such as classical music (Bourdieu, 1984). This research utilised the middle-class fractions, as outlined by Bull (2019). Researching class through this lens bring to the foreground power relations, competition, and hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1993) within music, as well as the ongoing struggle for legitimation, power, and dominance (Grenfell and Hardy, 2007).

The findings from the data emphasise the importance of access to high-level music education prior to studying, with many students from state school backgrounds feeling 'behind' their peers from private and specialist music schools, or those who had access to high-level music education programmes such as junior conservatoires and national level music ensembles. The findings reveal how attending these programmes helped students to develop not just higher-ability performance skills but were a significant part in students' decisions to study music at a conservatoire, shifting their view from music as a 'hobby', to a serious career path.

When asked about career prospects, many considered having a portfolio career in music, listing multiple possible music-related jobs (such as teaching, performance, community music). However, only just over half (51.8%) felt confident that they would be able to have a career in music. The impact of Covid-19 lockdowns may have also affected the results of this study with over half (61.1%) believing Covid-19 had affected their musical progression or career decisions.

Drawing upon the data, three key themes emerged regarding how the conservatoire influences students' future career decisions. Firstly, the conservatoire appeared to open doors for many students, offering a much wider range of music-related career opportunities. Secondly, students' success at the conservatoire helped to reinforce their convictions to become a professional musician. And finally, for some their experiences at a conservatoire made them doubt the viability of music as a career for them. Financial uncertainty was of deep concern to many students, and some spoke about choosing to reject the idea of making great personal sacrifices for their art; instead choosing to step away from music as a career.

These financial barriers at such a pivotal point in a young persons' life, should be of major concern for music education and industry stakeholders. As one of the interview participants pointed out: 'It's not necessarily the best singer who is the most successful'. These findings challenge the notion of music as a meritocracy, the belief that 'hard work, talent, and ambition are essential to getting ahead' (Carey, Florisson, O'Brien and Lee, 2020). Conservatoires and higher music education providers play an essential role in the future of the music industry, therefore should not just be preparing students for the industry but leading the change in access and representation (Bull, 2019; Tregear et al., 2016).

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