

# SRHE

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into Higher Education*

***“How much are you willing to give up?”***

**Investigating how socio-economic background influences undergraduate music students’ experiences and career aspirations within UK conservatoires.**

Research report

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*Disclaimer: The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Society for Research into Higher Education*

## Executive summary

Although discussions concerning representation within the classical music industry are gaining public attention, it is unclear if and how this is prompting change within teaching and learning inside UK music conservatoires. This scoping study addresses a significant gap in the literature by illuminating current undergraduate students' experiences of studying at two UK music conservatoires, centring on if and how socio-economic background influences their experiences of studying and their future career aspirations.

Data were collected from undergraduate music students (n=54) through an online survey, followed by nine semi-structured interviews. Although the original intention of the study was to collect data from working class music students, the sample changed to students from middle-class backgrounds from state-school backgrounds, or those who had faced financial barriers to accessing music education prior to starting their undergraduate degree. Three key themes are addressed through the report. The first theme highlights how many of the participants who took part in the study felt they needed to *catch-up* to their peers from more affluent backgrounds and who had received additional musical training prior to starting their undergraduate degree. The second theme explores concerns raised by participants in the *teaching and learning cultures* of UK Conservatoires. The third and final theme explains how undergraduate students' *career aspirations* were impacted both positively and negatively by their experiences of conservatoire life, and how economic background played a role when considering entering the professional classical music industry. The report concludes with how the findings contribute to the wider field of research and recommendations for conservatoire leaders and music education stake-holders.

## Introduction to the study

Despite increasing calls for more equal representation in music (inter alia: Khomami, 2015; Pentreath, 2020; Stevens, 2021), access to the arts remains unequal (Arts Council England, 2014; Scharff, 2015; Carey, Florisson, O'Brien and Lee, 2020). Although the creative industries contribute significantly to the UK economy both in job creation and UK economic growth (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2021), only 12% (Carey, Florisson, O'Brien and Lee, 2020: 12) of the performing and visual arts workforce come from working-class backgrounds. There is significant lack of research into 'classical music from a sociocultural perspective' (Bull, 2019: 1) and 'contemporary associations between class and classical music are under-studied' (Bull, 2018: 67).

Furthermore, increasing cuts to music education in the UK raise concern that it will become even more elitist (Gill, 2017: online). Music conservatoires act as gatekeepers to the classical music industry in 2019, the Independent Society for Musicians (ISM) reported that only 3.5% of music conservatoire entrants were from a 'highly deprived background' (Daubney, Spruce and Annetts, 2019: 17), equating to 15 out of 430 students. By examining publicly available data published through the Higher Education Statistics Agency (<https://www.hesa.ac.uk>), privately educated students are overly represented at UK conservatoires with London conservatoires having some the lowest numbers of state school students in the country, with less than 50% of their undergraduate entrants from state schools in 2020-21<sup>1</sup>. Putting these figures in the same year, 68.7% of entrants at the University of Oxford were from a state school background, with 70% from the University of Cambridge. Likewise, a report by Bull et al. (2022) found that at least 19% of students at conservatoires are privately educated. Despite the low numbers of state schools students, class inequalities 'do not appear to be current priorities for EDI work in music HE' (Bull et al., 2022: 143) and conservatoires have not had to endure the same level of public scrutiny as other

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that student in-take can vary dramatically between conservatoires, and although one institution in London had over 60% privately education students, another conservatoire outside of London had less than 10% students from private schools

prestigious higher education institutions such as the University of Oxford or Cambridge (Caizley, 2019).

Although increasing numbers of students from working-class backgrounds have had greater access to higher education, research has found that they face several challenges not just academically, but socially due to feeling 'out of place' (Arts Council England, 2014: 7) and feeling not like they belong in elite institutions (Reay et al., 2009: 11). Additional challenges also include taking on paid work during their study, or having family responsibilities (Reay et al., 2009). It is for these reasons why this scoping study aimed to investigate how class and socio-economic background may play a role in how undergraduate music students experience studying at a conservatoire and how they imagine their future careers.

## Research questions

This scoping study focuses on the accounts of current undergraduate conservatoire students from state schools and/or who have faced financial barriers to accessing music education prior to starting at the conservatoire. The following research questions were produced to guide the focus of the study:

1. Does socio-economic background influence undergraduate students' access to music education prior to studying at the conservatoire?
2. How do undergraduate music students from state school backgrounds experience studying at a conservatoire?
3. What role does socio-economic background play in conservatoire undergraduate students' imagined futures and career aspirations?

## Literature review

The study is situated at a critical period of a musician's development as they transition out of formal secondary school or further education, into higher music education. This transitional time is also before they enter the professional music industry. As a result, this research is located between three main fields of literature (see Figure 1):

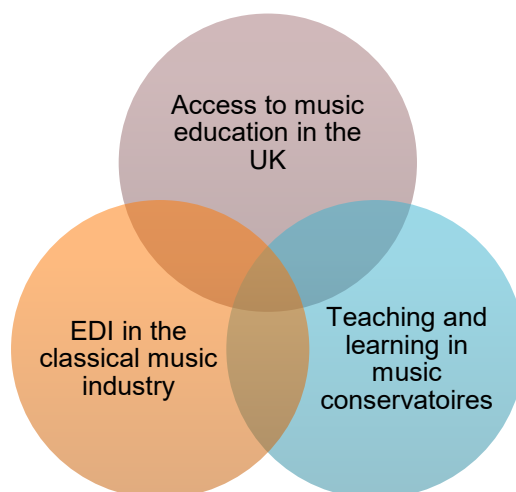


Figure 1: Locating the study

Firstly, the literature review will discuss studies that investigate access to music education in the UK and the possible barriers students may face; secondly, relevant key areas will be highlighted regarding the teaching and learning of music in conservatoires; and finally, an investigation into current research concerning equality, diversity, and inclusion in the classical music industry. The literature review specially focuses on how class and socio-economic background intersect with educational experiences to contextual the findings of this scoping study.

### Access to music education in the UK

Access to conservatoires relies on an audition process (Burt-Perkins and Mills, 2009) whereby a high level of musical proficiency is expected; therefore those that already have 'access to private instrumental tuition' (p. 821) will be at a 'significant advantage' (ibid). The question of how students advance to these high standards is warrant of further discussion (Griffiths, 2020). Despite music being a statutory part of the English national curriculum for students up to the age of 14, opportunities for 'excellent music



education' have been called 'patchy' (Henley, 2011: 17) across England. Although traits such as gender and ethnicity play an intersectional role, research has repeatedly shown the main barrier to music education to be the cost of learning to play an instrument (ABRSM, 2014). Factors such as shrinking music departments and diminishing time for the arts in secondary school timetable scheduling (Daubney and Mackrill, 2017) have all contributed to a crisis in music education in England. In 2023, the numbers of students taking Advanced level (A-level) and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) music hit a record low, with a 7% drop (ISM, 2023) and 12.5% drop since 2022 (Hall, 2023) respectively, meaning that either fewer young people are not selecting music as a subject, or they are not being offered the chance to take music beyond key stage 3 (ages 11-14). Since 2010, the ISM and other arts organisations have repeatedly campaigned against the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), an accountability system in English schools that measures how many young people secure certain GCSE examination results in a range of subjects, of which music and the arts are not included. The ISM have done extensive research showing a 'decline of 36% in music GCSE entries since the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) was introduced' (ISM, 2023: online).

However, these cuts to music education have not been felt equally between state and private schools. A report published by the ISM found that 'pupils from a highly deprived background' (Daubney, Spruce and Annetts, 2019, p.16) were less likely to take music at GCSE, and UK Music reported that 50% of students at independent schools receive 'sustained music tuition', whilst it is only 15% of students at state schools (UK Music, 2018). The British Phonographic Industry also found that although 85% of independent schools have a school orchestra, only 12% of schools from the most deprived areas have one (2019). Using publicly available data from the National Pupil Database and POLAR postcode data, which indicates levels of access to higher education, Whittaker et al. (2019) discovered that independent schools account for a 'disproportionately high number of A-level music entries' (p. 1) with over 20% of A-level music entries distributed across fewer than 50 schools (ibid.). As A-level is traditionally viewed as a prerequisite to studying at higher education (Burt-Perkins and Mills, 2009), there are concerns that music education will solely become available for the 'wealthy' (Gill, 2017: online), impacting the diversity of the talent pipeline for the music industry.

Due to the audition processes of conservatoires, it has been argued that it is not just technical music proficiency needed to secure a place, but other aspects such as personality traits may play a role. A Swedish study with music education students found that during auditions, applicants were assessed on their personality and ability to fit the programme, institution and 'prospective profession' (Sandberg-Jurström, Lindgren and Zandén, 2021: 79). What is illuminating from this study is that auditioners believed these personality traits to be 'impossible to learn' (ibid.) and should already be in place prior to studying. Prokop and Reitsamer (2023) talked about the concept of the ideal classical music student as not only meeting the technical standards, but students must also be 'familiar with the canon of "Western" art music and literature' (p. 37), as well as possessing an 'artistic personality and potential' (p. 39). Likewise, Fiorentino's (2020) study with two US college music students of colour found that prospective music students had to prove they could 'speak the institutional language' (p. 150), and whilst some students had spent years learning 'the customs of the institutions' (ibid), others had not. As a result, students not from '(upper) middle-class backgrounds' were expected to 'work harder than their peers' (Prokop and Reitsamer, 2023: 37) in order to be at the same level. Due to a lack of relevant literature from the UK, these studies present an international perspective that highlight an important issue regarding interview and audition requirements and some of the barriers students from less privileged backgrounds might face.

## Teaching and learning in music conservatoires

Derived from the term *to preserve*, conservatoires were traditionally designed as the training grounds for European orchestral musicians (inter alia: Davidson and Smith, 1997; Ford 2010). There are currently nine music conservatoires in the UK:

1. Royal Birmingham Conservatoire
2. LAMDA (London Academy of Music & Dramatic Art)
3. Leeds Conservatoire
4. Royal Academy of Music
5. Royal College of Music
6. Royal Northern College of Music

7. Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
8. Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama
9. Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance.

Conservatoire education is described as having:

*...a strong vocational, performance orientation, and course structures are reflective of the industry...students are expected to practise extensively in their own time...All teaching staff at conservatoires are working professionals. There is a strong emphasis on one-to-one tuition, alongside group work and performances. (UCAS, 2023: online).*

Although there is strong emphasis upon preparing students for industry, there is uncertainty as to what the classical music industry will look like in the future. As commented by McArton (2022) earning a career as a musician is not easy and ‘even for those who have experienced relative success, the financial reward of ‘making it’ is not quite as lucrative as one might expect’ (p. 166). Recognising that many students will go on to have diverse portfolio careers (Bartleet et al. 2019), and ‘complex working lives’ (Teague and Smith, 2015: 177), conservatoires have had to adapt and diversify what they teach (inter alia: Renshaw, 1986, 1992; Burland and Pitts, 2007; Burnard, 2013; Haddon and Burnard, 2016; Shaw, 2021; Encarnacao and Blom, 2022). Questions regarding the relevance of conservatoires (Georgii-Hemming, Johansson, and Moberg 2020) and who they are really, have been ongoing. As Tregear et al. (2016) argued; instead of being ‘defenders’ (p. 277) of outdated traditions, conservatoires should be places of change and social good.

Despite research into alternative conservatoire teaching methods, and concerns being raised (inter alia: Persson, 1994; Mills and Smith, 2003; Mills, 2004, 2006; Presland, 2005; Burland and Pitts, 2007; Gaunt, 2008, 2017; McPhee, 2011; Perkins, 2013a; Juntunen, 2014), the master-apprentice approach of one-to-one tuition, common in the teaching of western classical music (Gaunt, 2017), has remained relatively unchanged since the 18<sup>th</sup> century model of conservatoires (Ford, 2010; Carey et al. 2013; Rumiantsev et al., 2020). This mode of teaching is also what prospective students may come to expect from a conservatoire education (Burt and Mills, 2006). This lack of change in pedagogical practices may be due to a lack of formal pedagogical training (Haddon, 2009) or qualifications needed to teach instrumental lessons in the UK. Instead many instrumental teachers learn through ‘trial and error’ (Purser, 2005: 295),

often replicating how they themselves were taught (Mills and Smith, 2003; Blair, 2008). Once a tutor gains a teaching position at a conservatoire, they may not be expected to undergo any training or monitoring; as Purser (2005) describes it as a 'secret trade' (p. 296). Shaw (2022) raises the often-overlooked issue that a high percentage of conservatoire staff are on hourly-paid contracts, and due to a lack of time and funding, training is rarely compulsory; as one participant worryingly commented: 'We don't line manage [the instrumental teaching staff]. We're not always convinced that they're terribly up to date with their [pedagogic] practices' (p. 106).

Certain pedagogical practices and behaviours, such as 'perfectionism' (Hill et al., 2019) and competitiveness have become 'legitimised traditions' (Rostvall and West, 2003: 214) and cultural practices (Giroux, 1985; Lave and Wenger, 2005) within conservatoire education. Bull (2021) argues that due to hierarchical power relations between staff and students, abusive behaviour in instrumental teaching can be easily dismissed, describing how bullying and humiliation are normalized. In recent years, stories regarding psychological, physical and sexual abuse within classical music teaching continue to reach headlines (inter alia: Gallagher 2013; Pace, 2013; Fetters, Chan, and Wu, 2020; Law, 2020; Butterworth, 2023) highlighting the necessity to re-think teaching and learning within the conservatoire environment.

## **Equality, diversity and inclusion in the classical music industry**

Whilst a career in music is assumed to be the end point of studying at a conservatoire (Jørgensen, 2009), it remains highly competitive (Perkins, 2013b: 206). The classical music industry has undergone significant challenge in recent years, especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Underhill, 2022). Working conditions are often 'informal and precarious, with uncertain employment, low pay, unsociable hours' (Coz and Kilshaw, 2021: 3). As raised by Bloodworth (2016), a degree in and of itself not enough to guarantee work, therefore graduates are often required to undertake additional opportunities such as unpaid internships (Brook, O'Brien and Taylor, 2020) which can disadvantage those from working-class backgrounds without financial security (O'Brien, Brook, and Taylor, 2018), or who do not have access to the same level of 'time, money and industry contacts' (Prokop and Reitsamer, 2023: 31): 'Even when

minority groups are successful in 'getting in' to the [creative] industry, they face substantial barriers to 'getting on' (Carey, Florisson, O'Brien and Lee, 2020: 5). The narrative of the *tortured artist* is a common trope when discussing creative occupations; of sacrifice, being 'driven by passion', and working 'long hours for little or even no pay' (Conor, Gill and Taylor, 2015: 2). As a result, Bull (2018) raises an interesting provocation that, for those from upper- and middle-class backgrounds, a career in classical music may lead to lowering someone's social class position.

Another relevant theme when discussing equality, diversity and inclusion in the creative industries is that of meritocracy, which describes how 'the most talented people rise to the top – and reap the financial rewards' (Bloodworth, 2016: 10). Research with creative workers found that the majority believed in the notion of meritocracy and that 'hard work, talent, and ambition are essential to getting ahead' (Carey, Florisson, O'Brien and Lee, 2020). However, it is argued that meritocracy masks structural inequality imbedded within the creative industry (Gill 2014; O'Brien, Brook, and Taylor, 2018). For example, Dibben (2006), argued that 'institutional culture...favours certain kinds of students' (p. 92), and that financial background had an impact on learning in music students (ibid.). Similarly, Prokop and Reitsamer (2023) found that, rather than acknowledging differing social and education experiences, music students from musical families were seen by conservatoire tutors as 'talented and gifted' (p. 37).

The concerns raised in the literature review emphasise the inequality currently present within music education and the music industry. Inequalities in education ultimately filter down the talent pipeline (Arts Council England, 2014) with music conservatoires acting as gatekeepers. As expressed by Burt-Perkins and Mills (2009), the challenges facing conservatoires are complex:

*First, it is to minimise the disadvantage of these who have not had access to expensive instrumental tuition...second, it is to ensure that students have access to teaching and learning that facilitate development regardless of background. (p.821)*

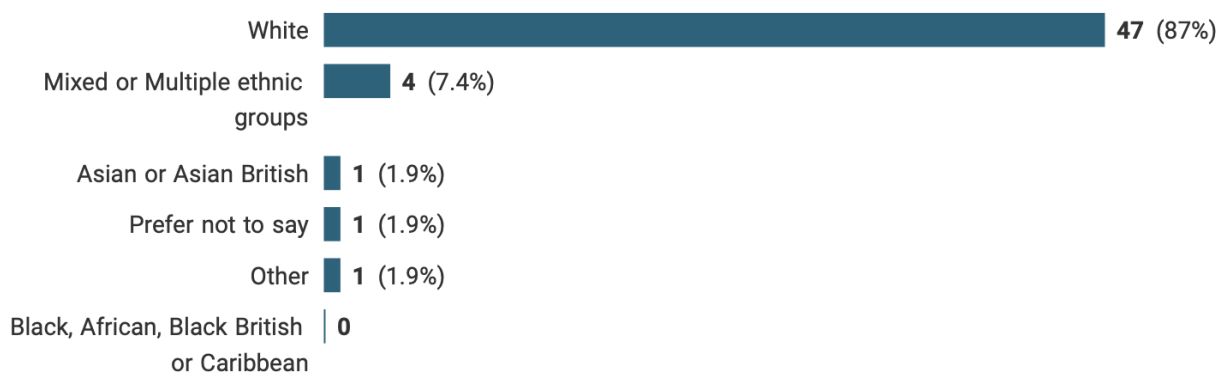
This scoping study aims to provide further information and context from current undergraduate conservatoire students to uncover the barriers facing young people from state school backgrounds hoping to earn a career in music.

## Methodology

Research methods drew from interpretivist-constructivist paradigms, involving mixed methods allowing for investigation of both breadth and depth (Johnson et al. 2007: 123). To help understand and observe the complexity of ‘human action’ (Bryman, 2016: 28), data were collected ‘from the point of view of those who live it’ (Schwandt, 1994: 118), with the understanding that participants attribute meaning through their own interpretations of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2009). Acknowledging the landscape of a post-pandemic climate, data collection took a two-staged online approach with two UK conservatoire institutions during the 2022-23 academic year.

## Participant sample

Firstly, all undergraduate music students (excluding first year students) were invited to take part in an online questionnaire with information regarding the focus and the title of the study presented. The sample was self-selecting with 54 usable responses from a range of year groups and different principal study courses (see Appendix A). 27 (50%) identified as female, 21 (38.9%) as male, 5 (9.3%) as non-binary, with 1 person preferring not to answer. Acknowledging the role intersectionality can play in barriers to music, participants’ ethnic backgrounds were also requested (Figure 2):



**Figure 2: Ethnic background of survey participants**

41 of respondents (75.9%) had attended a state secondary school, with 7 (13%) coming from a grammar school, 8 (14.9%) from fee-paying private school, including 1 (1.6%) from a specialist music school. 1 participant was home schooled and 2 classed

their education as 'other'. Although this goes against previous literature that highlights the overrepresentation of students from private school backgrounds, one rationale for this may be due to the topic of the study being presented to participants before self-selecting to take part.

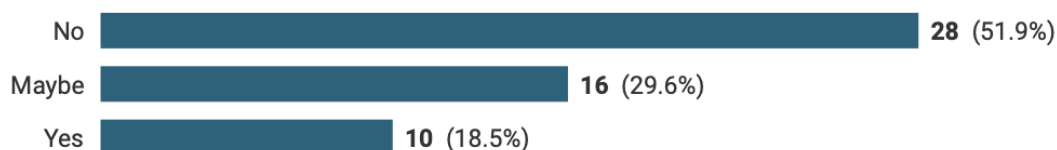
Whilst attempting to classify the survey participants through social class, using data such as school type, parents' occupation and level of education, challenges occurred as it was not always clearly identifiable. Over half of survey respondents (35, 64.8%) reported that both parents had attended university, 11 (20.4%) had one parent attend university, and only 5 (9.3%) stated that no parents had been to university. A high percentage (62%) of parents worked within the top three occupation categories as listed by SOC2020 (see Appendix A). 10 participants listed only one parent's occupation, suggesting a single income household.

With the information presented, most survey respondents were categorised within middle-class fractions used by Bull (2019), with only one student identified as from a working-class background (Table 1):

**Table 1: Survey respondents by social class**

Class Fraction	Number or participants	Percentage
New middle-class	17	31.5%
Professional middle-class	24	44.4%
Upper middle-class	1	1.9%
Working-class	1	1.9%
Unknown	11	20.4%

An additional measure was also considered, where participants were asked if they were from a 'musical family'. Interestingly just over half of survey respondents (28, 51.9%) believed they were not from a 'musical family' (see Figure 3), with many commenting how they were the first musician in their family:



**Figure 3: Would you say you come from a "musical" family?**

This data aimed to highlight potential differences in answers from those who felt they were from a 'musical' family, compared to those who believed to be the first in their family.

Part of the purpose of the survey was to identify participants to take part in an online semi-structured interview. The interviews aimed to capture different perspectives and 'interpretations of the world' (Cohen et al., 2007: 349) in more depth. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility (Robson, 2002), whilst remaining manageable in the timeframe. 19 undergraduate students voluntarily left an email address to be contacted for the follow-up interview. Due to the lack of students within the working-class categorisation, selection for interviews focused on students from state school background and/or who had expressed facing barriers to their music education, in particular financial. By taking a purposive maximal sampling approach, whereby the sample was selected not to 'ensure representativeness' (Simons, 2009: 30) but to give a range of perspectives (Seidman, 1998) and that were 'information rich' (Patton, 2015: 264), 9 students were interviewed totalling 305 minutes of interview data, with an average length of 34 minutes. Contextual details of these 9 students are outlined in Table 2:



**Table 2: Interview participant details**

<b>Participant pseudonym</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>Course details</b>	<b>Ethnic background</b>	<b>Musical Background</b>	<b>Parental university education</b>	<b>Parental occupations</b>
<b>Jacob</b> (He/him)	A	Jazz (4 <sup>th</sup> year)	White	Father	One parent	Teacher at pupil referral unit
<b>Nicole</b> (She/her)	A	Woodwind (2 <sup>nd</sup> year)	White	Grandfather	One parent	Solicitor and electrician
<b>Max</b> (He/him)	A	Composition (4 <sup>th</sup> year)	White	First in the family	Both parents	Midwife and carpenter
<b>Jeffery</b> (He/him)	A	Brass (3 <sup>rd</sup> year)	White	Father	Both parents	Methodist super intendent
<b>Lena</b> (She/her)	A	Harp (2 <sup>nd</sup> year)	Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups	First in the family	Both parents	Business consultant and foster carer
<b>Taylor</b> (They/them)	A	Woodwind (4 <sup>th</sup> year)	White	First in the family	Both parents	Social worker
<b>Bela</b> (They/them)	B	Strings (2 <sup>nd</sup> year)	White	Family of musicians	Both parents	Lecturers
<b>Darcy</b> (She/her)	B	Vocal (3 <sup>rd</sup> year)	White	First in the family	One parent	Data processing
<b>Anastasia</b> (She/her)	B	Vocal (3 <sup>rd</sup> year)	Black Caribbean and White	First in the family	One parent	Researcher

As can be seen from Table 2, all interview participants had one or both parents/guardians attend university, with over half (57%) holding professional occupations (see Appendix B), therefore located within the middle-classes. Four participants listed a single household income and most participants who were selected for interview expressed some financial challenges to their musical learning. All but one participant had attended a state school growing up, but as she had faced financial difficulties coming from a single parent household and being a young carer, she was invited to take part in the interview. She was also a mature student and one of the few people of colour who took part in the survey. Although it was not requested in the survey or interviews, four students openly discussed their neurodivergence, and others talked about mental health challenges such as depression, addiction, and performance anxiety.

## **Theoretical concepts of class**

Taking an intersectional approach to identity, information was requested from participants including gender and ethnic background, as well educational background, parents' occupations, and if any of their parents had attended higher education (see Appendix A). By adapting the nine major categories from the UK Standard Occupational Classification (SOC, 2020), it was possible to group parental occupations (see Appendix A and B). However, categorisations of class are complex and contested (Carey, Florisson, O'Brien and Lee, 2020), as expressed by O'Brien, Brook, and Taylor (2018): 'Class is a technical term used in academic research to understand how society is organised... There are disagreements over the definition, its boundaries, what 'counts' and what does not, for understanding class.' (p. 16). Bourdieusian theories of class are drawn upon, whereby capital (including economic, cultural, social and symbolic) can indicate markers of class and used to navigate within a field such as classical music (Bourdieu, 1984). Researching class through a Bourdieusian lens bring to the foreground power relations, competition, and hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1993) as well as struggle for legitimation, power and dominance (Grenfell and Hardy, 2007).

Given the challenges of obtaining interview data from working-class students, the research utilised the middle-class fractions as outlined by Bull (2019):

- New middle-class: parents joined the middle-class as adults, with least one parent working in a skilled occupation or management position
- Professional middle-class: parents had attended university and worked within professional occupations
- Upper middle-class: as with the professional middle-class but had also attended private school

(adapted from Bull, 2019: 11)

As with Bull's (2018) research, the boundaries between these class fractions were not always clear cut. Although socio-economic background was the focus of the study, through the process of the study it became important to observe how intersectionality influenced students' experiences.

## Data analysis

Data analysis took a thematic analysis approach involving 'identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun and Clarke, 2014: 6). The following steps were taken (Braun and Clarke, 2014):

1. Familiarisation with data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the final report

To ensure consistency and focus, four questions were asked to all interview participants:

1. What were the key events that led you to decide to study music and apply for the conservatoire, and were there any challenges or barriers for you?
2. Did you feel prepared for what studying at the conservatoire would entail?
3. Do you feel like the conservatoire is an inclusive educational environment?

#### 4. Do you feel that a career in music is for you?

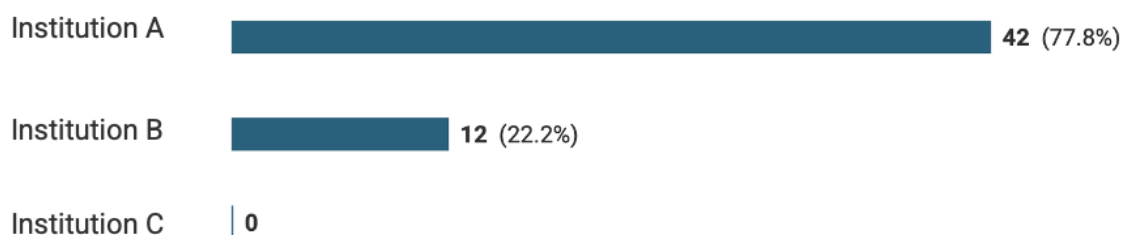
46 initial codes were listed from the survey results and interviews, which were then condensed down into 7 core themes (see Appendix C). A further round of analysis of the transcribed interviews was conducted, highlighting each theme in an associated colour (see example in Appendix D).

Quantitative data from the survey were treated as descriptive analysis indicating frequencies (Punch, 2014) and supporting the qualitative data. Some basic comparison of data from the surveys was conducted to illicit differences in experiences based on school-type, or family background, however given the small sample size, this aimed to uncover potential lines of enquiry as part of this scoping study, rather than to make any generalisable correlations.

### **Ethics and challenges to conducting the research**

The research was approved through the ethics committee at the University of Wolverhampton before data were collected. Informed consent was collected through a signed consent form from the intuitions as well as the interview participants. Ongoing assent was also monitored. Confidentiality was imperative as participants may disclose information that might be harmful to the reputation of an institution. Anonymising took place by asking participants to select a pseudonym, as well as altering certain identifiable details where necessary.

Over the course of the study, there were several challenges to access. Firstly, due to the Covid-19 pandemic it was agreed by conservatories leaders to delay the study by 12 months due to concerns that results could be affected. Unfortunately, this had a negative impact as one of the original three conservatoire institutions pulled out of the research. Although I was able to source an alternative conservatoire, there was a discrepancy between the number of respondents between institutions with no students taking the online survey from instruction C (see Figure 4):



**Figure 4: Survey respondents by institution**

In order to complete the scoping study within the timeframe, it was agreed that the research would continue with just two settings but increasing the number of interviews at both institutions.

As raised in the literature review, music students from working-class backgrounds studying might be a hard-to-reach group. It was more challenging than anticipated to find participants from working-class backgrounds with most respondents coming from middle-class backgrounds (see Table 1). On top of this, it was not possible to identify just over 20% of respondents' social class due to vague answers given in the survey. As a result, the focus of the scoping study adapted to investigate to undergraduate students from state-schools or those who had faced barriers to music education, in particular financial barriers.

## Positionality

It must be recognised that a 'researcher's identity, values and beliefs cannot be entirely eliminated from the process of analysing qualitative data' (Denscombe, 2010: 302). Viewing autoethnography as an ethical approach the research (Lapadat, 2017) I recognise the need to acknowledge my own privileges and relationship with social class. I am a white, British, heterosexual, cisgender female with a specific learning disability (dyslexia) with someone who has experienced long-term chronic pain.

I have an interesting relationship with class. As a teenager my family would have been referred to as new middle-class but my mum was the first in her family to attend university as a single mum (with me!). When I was six years old, she took up employment as a mechanical engineer, and later as a maths teacher in North West of England. I spent most of my weekends travelling down the M6 motorway to visit my

dad, a joiner who later studied to become a nurse. My state secondary school was situated in an area of low participation for higher education (POLAR rating quintile 2) but despite the challenges the school faced<sup>2</sup>, it had a dedicated music department. I received free instrumental lessons through the music service, and I was able to attend some local extra-curricular music activities.

Upon considering my options for higher education, I became aware of the competition I was up against with those who had attended private or music specialist schools, and junior conservatoire programmes. In 2009 I was offered a scholarship to study composition at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire. I felt incredibly lucky to get into a conservatoire but suffered with imposter syndrome, perhaps not helped by being the only female composer in my year. Since graduating, I have witnessed first-hand the increasing challenges facing music education in state schools. My experiences as a music educator and a lecturer both at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire and the University of Wolverhampton have influenced my research and advocacy work for better representation and equity within music education and the music industry.

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<sup>2</sup> Whilst as a student the school was put into 'special measures' by Ofsted and later in 2018 was featured in an episode on BBC's panorama

## Findings

The following section will outline the main findings of the study; firstly from the survey data, followed by data collected from the nine interviews with undergraduate conservatoire students.

### Survey findings

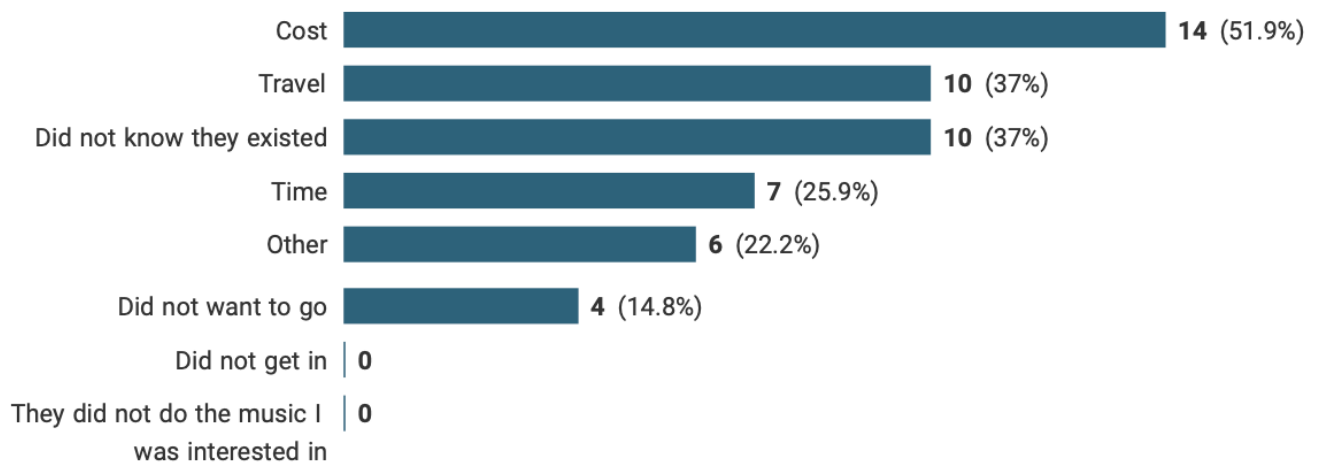
The data collected from the survey (n=54) is presented in three sections; starting with the importance of music education prior to studying at the conservatoire, moving onto the different experiences students had of studying their undergraduate music degree, and finally how their career aspirations may be influenced by these experiences.

#### The significance of music education prior to the conservatoire

Just under half of the survey respondents (25, 47.2%) attended an out-of-school music centre or junior conservatoire programme prior to studying at the conservatoire. Of this group, 21 (84%) believed this to have played an important part in their decision to study at a conservatoire. The most prevalent reason was that it gave students a 'taste' of what studying at a music conservatoire might entail, as well as getting use to the 'environment' and teachers, and having a 'community' of 'like-minded peers'. Attending these programmes encouraged students to view music not just as a 'hobby', but as a viable career. The high-level of tuition found at junior conservatoires assisted many of the students to get to 'conservatoire level' in their performance, and several reported it had significantly helped them in their degree work, especially during their first year.

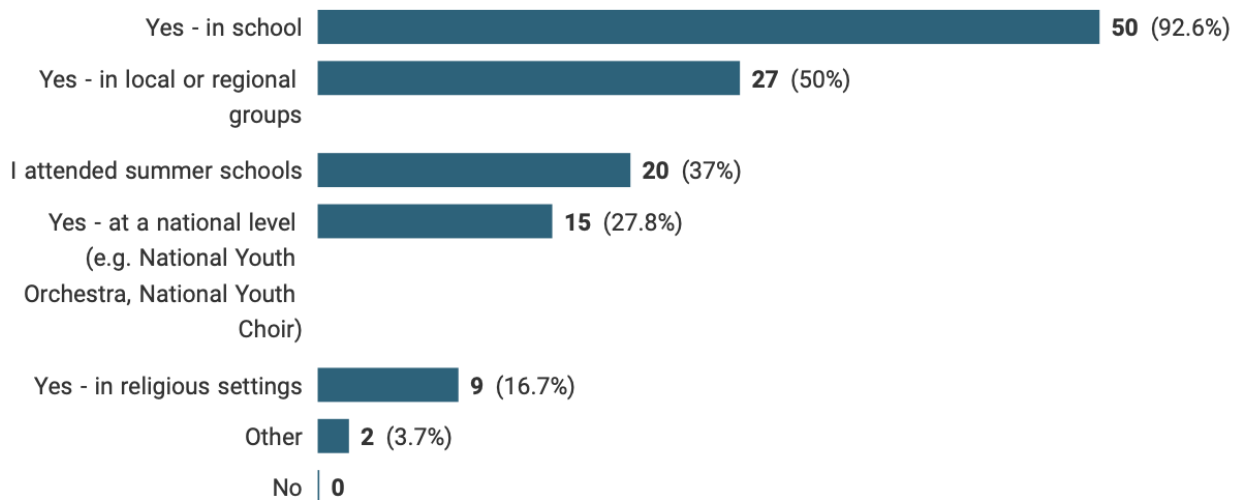
The main reasons for not joining a junior programme are shown in Figure 5, with cost being the main barrier:

*I was on low income. The council funded half of my music lessons at Saturday Music school. Without this financial support, I would have been unable to pursue music.*



**Figure 5: Reasons for not attending a music centre or junior conservatoire**

The survey also asked about other music making opportunities students had been a part of prior to studying at a conservatoire (see Figure 6):



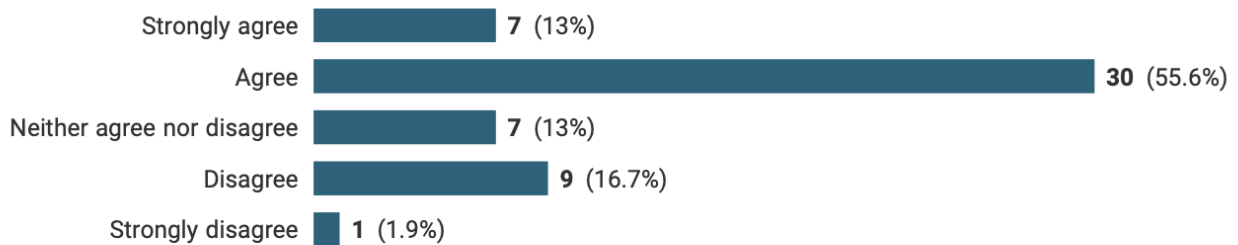
**Figure 6: Were you able to engage in music making activities/ensembles/choirs/bands prior to the conservatoire?**

Given the ongoing challenges for music in schools described in the literature review, it was impressive to see that 50 (92.6%) participants listed 'in school' as where they engaged in music making. However, given that the sample of this study are students who were able to progress to conservatoire study, the sample may be skewed towards those who had an active school music department. Several respondents commented

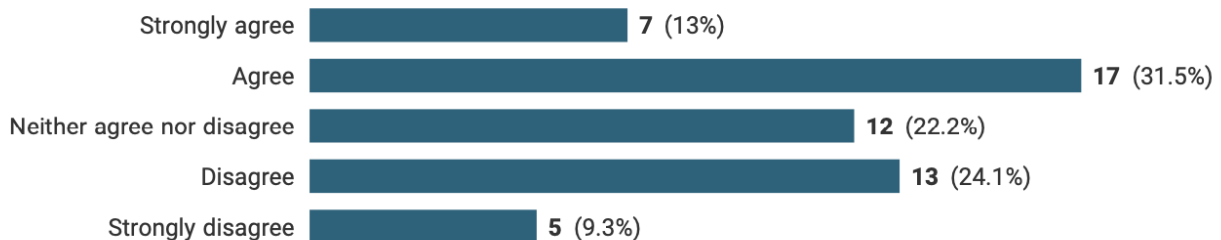


how they had felt *'lucky'* to have had access to music education in school or their local music hub. In contrast, other respondents described the lack of musical opportunities growing up, asserting that they were not challenged within local or school ensembles. The data here reveals the importance of school music and the influence of extra-curricular music activities in fostering further development and future aspirations.

To uncover thoughts about conservatoire study, eight statements were presented to students who were asked to agree or disagree using a Likert scale. Interestingly, over half (37, 8.6%) agreed that studying at a conservatoire was what they had expected (see Figure 7), but only 24 (44.5%) felt 'prepared':

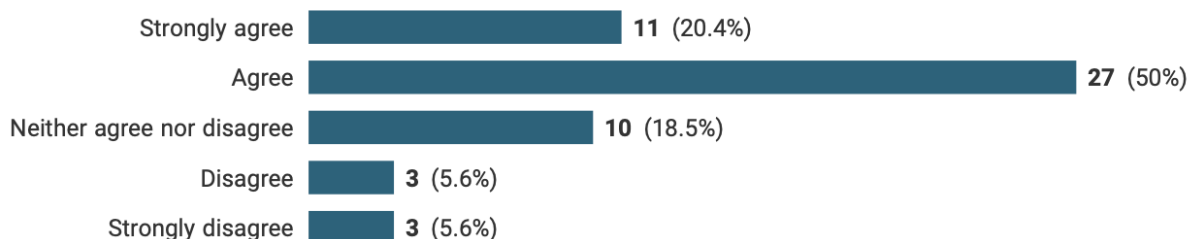


**Figure 7: Studying at the conservatoire has been what I expected**

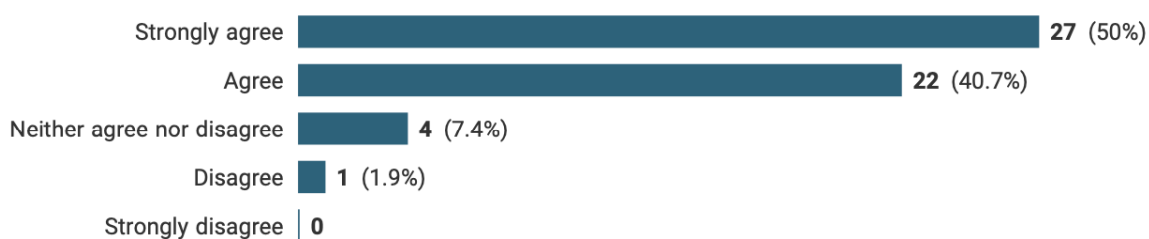


**Figure 8: I felt prepared for studying at the conservatoire**

By comparing the answers to Figure 7 and 8 between those that attended a junior conservatoire or weekend music centre, and those that did not, some initial differences can be seen. For example, for those that did attend, 76% said that studying at the conservatoire had been what they expected and 52% felt prepared, compared to only 63% and 37% respectively for those who did not attend a junior or music centre programme. When asking if students felt like they fit into the conservatoire environment, we can see from Figure 9 and 10 that the majority did:



**Figure 9: I felt like they 'fit in' at the conservatoire**



**Figure 10: I have been able to make friends and meet like-minded people**

Similarly, when comparing those who had attended a music centre or junior programme to those who did not, there is a slight difference with those who did attend scoring slightly higher: 76% felt like they fit in and 96% were been able to meet like-minded people compared to 63% who felt like they fit in and 85% had been able to meet like-minded people, for those that did not attend a junior conservatoire programme.

Differences between answers were not identified when comparing school type or by class. This may be due to the sample size and complexity of lived experiences. A larger sample size, and data from different social classes would be needed to locate a direct correlation between social class and the experiences of students, however the current data does emphasise the importance of prior musical experiences prior to studying at a conservatoire.

## Experiences of studying at a conservatoire

A method used to uncover students' thoughts and beliefs of studying at the conservatoire was asking participants to summarise their experience using 3 words. Out of a total of 144 words listed, 78 were unique words (see Figure 11):



**Figure 11: Word-cloud of words used to describe participants' experiences of studying at a conservatoire**

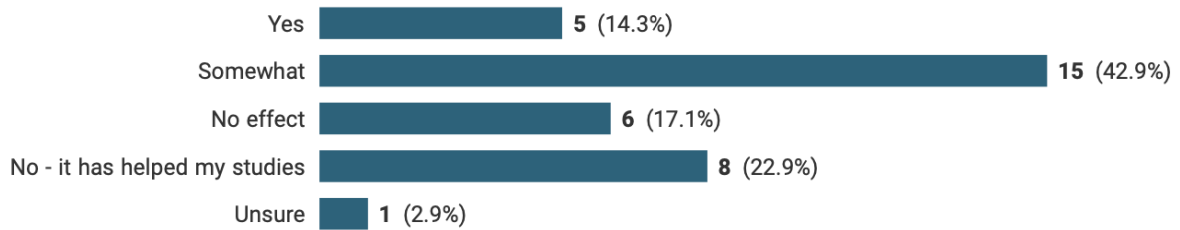
What immediately stood out in the analysis were two categories: firstly were the words that related to *enjoyment* such as 'friendly', 'fun', 'exciting' and 'engaging' (totalling 46 mentions), and secondly were the words that relate the *pressures* they faced such as 'stressful', 'challenging', 'intense' and 'busy' (totalling 45 mentions). Students described studying music as a 'rollercoaster' with one participant summarising it as: '*pain equals development*'. However, two students described where teaching and feedback crossed the line into bullying, having disastrous effects on their future aspirations:

I end my studies resolute that I want music to have no part in my professional life. Largely the joy and intrinsic motivators of my music making have been destroyed and sucked dry by the experience of conservatoire study.

Allegations of 'favouritism', 'subjective marking', 'prejudice' and 'discrimination', were also raised as a concern and warrant further investigating, especially regarding if and how these experience may differ between social class.

Over half of respondents (64.8%) held some form of part-time employment during studying. Of this group, 54.3% said the employment was related to music (such as

teaching, stewarding, performing, working in a music shop), but 57.2% believed that their part-time job had hindered their studies in some way (Figure 12):



**Figure 12: Has working in paid employment hindered your studies in any way?**

Dibben (2006) discovered that music students ‘from less affluent backgrounds’ were ‘more likely to take on term-time employment, and to work longer hours than students from more affluent backgrounds’ (p. 108). When comparing the number of students who had to take on part-time employment with class fraction there seems to be some potentially differences with a higher percentage of students from new middle-class backgrounds having to take on part-time employment compared to professional middle-class (Table 3):

**Table 3: Comparing class fraction with part-time employment**

Class Fraction	Number of students who had to take on part-time employment	Percentage of students who had to take on part-time employment
New middle-class	12/17	70.59%
Professional middle-class	14/24	58.33%
Upper middle-class	0/1	0%
Working-class	1/1	100%

As noted above, a greater sample size is needed in order to generalise these findings nevertheless, these align with previous research and the results offer a starting point for discussion and further research.

## Future career aspirations

The foremost reason for choosing to study music was due to students’ ‘love’, ‘passion’ and ‘enjoyment’ of music. Some participants talked about the importance of music as an essential part of their identity:

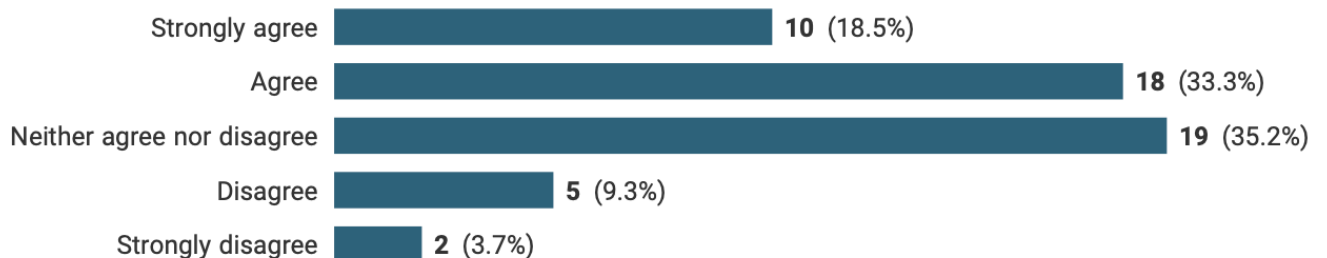
*I felt that I was meant to be a musician and couldn't be satisfied with doing anything else with my life*

Many believed that through a conservatoire education, they would be able to pursue their 'dream' of a career in music. Table 4 outlines the careers participants hoped to go in to, with many listing multiple possibilities highlighting the prevalence of a portfolio career in music:

**Table 4: Career aspirations of participants**

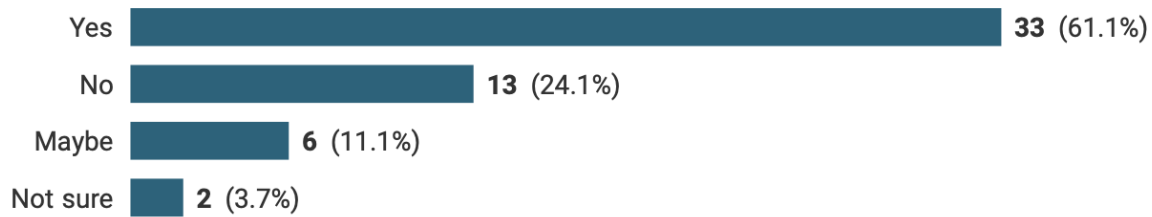
Aspirations beyond graduation	Frequency
Masters/further study	30
Teaching or community music	16
Freelance musician	15
Performance/orchestral work	12
Do not know	7
Non-music related work	5
Travel/gap year	2

However, only just over half 28 (51.8%) felt confident that they could make a career in music (Figure 13):



**Figure 13: I feel confident I can make a career in the music industry**

The Covid-19 pandemic seemed to have influenced some future career decisions four students expressing how the pandemic had exposed how unstable a career in music could be. Over half (33, 61.1%) agreeing that it had affected their musical progression or career decisions:



**Figure 14: Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic affected your musical progression or career decisions in any way?**

The main reasons listed for this was that they felt behind with certain skills due to a lack of performance opportunities during the lockdowns. Some also discussed the impact of the pandemic on mental health, including increased anxiety:

*I found myself becoming depressed. Even though things are better now, that stress isn't gone for me. I am looking into making music a smaller part of my life and pursuing an alternative career.*

The results from the survey elicit some important findings and concerns, especially in relation to the importance of prior music education in feeling prepared for studying at a conservatoire, the barriers some students face to accessing high level music education, the pressures students faced in conservatoire teaching and concerns for abusive behaviours, and finally changing considerations of future careers. The interview findings provide a deeper understanding about these complex topics.

## Interview findings

Three main themes emerged from the research interviews which will be explored in this section. The first theme was how students from state schools felt they had to “catch-up” to their peers who had been able to attend specialist music schools or junior conservatoires before starting their undergraduate degree at the conservatoire. Those who also had to undertake part-time employment to financially support their studies also reported facing additional challenges. The second theme raises further questions surrounding conservatoire teaching and learning cultures, including the high pressures students faced, the move to more to independent learning, and the training of conservatoire tutors in supporting a diverse range of students. The final theme discusses undergraduate students’ *career aspirations* including how financial concerns

influenced their future career decisions and the compounding intersectional challenges faced by some students. To portray the rich and contextual data elicited from the interviews, each theme will start with a short vignette drawn from a specific student's story.

## **Theme 1: Playing 'catch-up': Unequal access to music education**

### *Vignette 1: Jeffery*

*Jeffery found out about conservatoires through a friend and a supportive music teacher, although he admits he did not know very much about conservatoires before starting his degree. He, like others in his state school, saw music as a hobby, and admits that he 'never really practised very much'. He was a member of the school windband, brass ensemble and jazz band and felt 'lucky' to have had 'inspiring and energetic' music teachers in his state school who 'looked out for me'. Whilst at the conservatoire, Jeffery describes calling home in his first year asking: 'how did I get into this?'. Jeffery felt behind his peers, some who had had been to the 'National Youth Orchestra, or National Youth Brass Band or had gone to a music college like Cheetham's'. Due to not being able to attend a youth orchestra due to travel and cost, he felt a distinct lack of skills in orchestral playing and not understanding expectations at rehearsals; as he goes on to explain: rehearsals moved from just 'turning up and trying to play some right notes', to 'focusing more on music instead'. Similarly, he noticed a change of repertoire and different 'style of playing'. Jeffery articulated how he 'suddenly had to relearn' and 'learn a whole load of new skills'. For him, feedback from supportive tutors at the conservatoire was vital for him to 'try and catch up', and seeing improvement in his own playing was 'a good incentive to keep on practising'. Now in his 3<sup>rd</sup> year, Jeffery reflected on the struggles he experienced in first year saying: 'I was thinking whether I would [have] like things to have been different. I don't know if I would have, because it would mean that I was a different sort of player'. He expressed how he now feels proud of being able to play in a 'broad view of styles', feeling that his school experience had set him up to be a more versatile musician. He is now considering a career in performing, something he did not believe was possible before studying at the conservatoire.*

As the vignette illustrates, undergraduate music students may come with varying experience of prior music education. Many talked about feeling 'lucky' (Bela) to have had supportive music teachers in their state schools but not everyone was as fortunate. Darcy goes on to explain that due to living in a rural area she had to travel to get 'serious music lessons', but this came with great financial sacrifice:

*Darcy: [During] my gap year, I would work Monday to Friday and then do juniors on Saturdays...everything I earned, my paycheck would come in on the Friday and I would pay Junior's the next day. And it was all gone again.*

Like Jeffery, those who did not have access to high level music education programmes reported feeling behind their peers, often comparing themselves to other students:

*Taylor: There's a second year - she's fantastic, and I don't begrudge her for being fantastic cause she is genuinely, like, amazing. She went to Wells Cathedral School...and was taught by two with the top recorder players. And it shows, and she's fantastic.*

As Burt and Mills (2006) discovered, students can start to feel 'inferiority' when surrounded by other highly skilled musicians. Several students express experiencing imposter syndrome; Nicole talked about feeling 'behind', like a 'beginner', and not feeling like she 'fit in' to the conservatoire environment, whilst others asked themselves 'what am I doing here?' (Darcy).

The only two interview participants (Darcy & Lena) who were able to attend a junior conservatoire prior to starting their degree, talked about finding their transition into the senior conservatoire as much smoother, including knowing what to expect at the audition. In contrast Max recalled his own experience of the conservatoire audition:

*I had never played with a jazz band and I rushed to get myself sorted, and then first time I played in a group was at the audition. And so it [was] quite scary.*

Some students shared the challenges of affording musical instruments with Jeffery recalling during his audition being told 'if you're gonna [sic] study, you need to get a new trumpet'. Similarly, Taylor was told they were expected to buy a new instrument, but due to their 'parents not having any money' and 'already being in my overdraft', they did not believe it was 'feasible.'

On top of this, students talked about the negative impact of part-time employment on their studies:

*Anastasia: It's really hard to get a job whilst you're studying. They're expecting me to be in at 9 o'clock at night...It's five days a week and it's full on. It's kind of expected that you are available whenever. Weekends? That's their time [laugh]...as much as I love what I'm doing, I do feel like I'm in prison. I can't get myself a job to support myself. I'm just in a position where you know my partner is supporting me enough to carry on with what I'm doing. But it's difficult. It's really, really difficult...that's not inclusive and I think*



*that they are expecting that you have that support because, if I didn't have my partner I would definitely not be able to carry on with this course.*

Anastasia shared how students with more financial support were more able to attend concerts, volunteer, and build their networks. Having to take on part-time employment whilst already feeling behind other students who had prior access to high level music education could have a compounding negative effect on students from less affluent and state-school backgrounds.

## **Theme 2: 'You cope, or you don't': Concerns in conservatoire teaching culture**

### *Vignette 2: Taylor*

*As a child, instrumental lessons were encouraged by Taylor's parents, not as a 'career path', but as 'something that keeps me off the streets'. Being autistic, and with ADHD, music became a safe place and a 'special interest' for Taylor and they had hoped to one day become a performer and teacher at a conservatoire. Growing up, Taylor's family were unable to afford expensive instrumental lessons, therefore they felt at a disadvantage when starting their degree and failed their first assessment. Taylor commented how their instrumental teacher claimed that she had 'put in far more work than she's done with other students' and seeing it as 'holding my hand' through the exam. However, they argued that the level of teaching received was 'the right amount of work to support a person with my neurodivergent conditions'. Over the four years, Taylor claimed that they never felt like their neurodivergence had been 'understood'. In one account they go on to explain being made to feel like their ADHD was being used as an 'excuse', and when they informed their tutor of going onto medication their tutor replied that they were worried it would 'affect how emotive you are' during their end of year recital. Due to the stress and pressures of conservatoire life, Taylor disclosed mental health challenges which were not supported, and how they were made to feel 'shamed' for missing lessons. Despite music being a big part of their identity growing up, they expressed going through 'long periods of hating music', and even considered selling their instruments: 'It's hard because I joined here loving everything about [music], wanting to learn everything I could, and because of the lack of support I'm now only playing to finish my degree.'*

The account from Taylor raises critical questions as to the training of conservatoire tutors when working with students from diverse backgrounds, specifically those with learning disabilities and mental health challenges. Students in this study experienced a range of teaching, sometimes positive and transformative, where tutors went above and beyond what was expected. However, teaching did not always meet the standards

hoped for. Students compared their experiences of teaching at school, with a challenge being the move towards more independent learning being a 'shock to the system' (Anastasia). This echoes what Burt and Mills (2006) found when students 'move from spoon-fed' to a 'self-sufficient learning culture' (p.51). Similarly, Reay et al. (2009) found that working-class students 'were expected to be independent learners early on in their university course but without sufficient supervision and guidance' (p.8).

Another aspect raised was the constant pressure to succeed and sense of 'competition':

*Darcy: I would say I've experienced in a Conservatoire community is the constant like competition, not necessarily with each other, but even just with yourself and with the teachers.*

*Bela: When you're in a competitive institution... you're expected to consistently be great...competition against yourself...to be constantly expected to be pushing yourself, overextending yourself, achieving great things.*

To keep up with the standards expected, Anastasia described how: 'you either you cope, or you don't'. For a couple of students, this environment was believed to be necessary in order to improve:

*Max: You're like under a huge amount of strain and that's what humans are built for, really like to be pushed really hard in uncomfortable situations and then developing so.*

Although Max described his experience of conservatoire teaching as 'quite painful', 'stressful' and that they had felt 'very anxious', he admitted that he had 'improved so much'. However, for others students, their experience of one-to-one teaching had led to abusive behaviour:

*Taylor: I had a friend...who had to change her teacher because he was basically mentally abusive. The last thing he did he was he made her basically sob in a lesson and was like, "why are you crying? just carry on playing" and she made to carry on playing until she just walked out.*

Some students questioned the emphasis placed upon on principal study at the conservatoire, arguing for a broader musical education:

*Nicole: Two people came in...the multi-instrumentalist was trying to say, "play all the instruments", and the professional clarinettist was saying "if I play all the instruments,*

*I'm gonna be bad at most of them, so just play the clarinet and you'll be amazing'...I think the big issue with conservatories as a whole is that they teach you one instrument, to get good at one instrument. And if I want to go into a music service I'm expected to play saxophone and flute as well.*

Although playing multiple instruments may improve employability, within a conservatoire environment this was seen by some in a negative light.

### **Theme 3: Giving up of the 'fantasy': Shifting careers prospects**

#### ***Vignette 3: Anastasia***

*Anastasia describes how she received very poor school music education and later in life had to teach herself, and pay for her own lessons, which she described as 'investing in myself'. Although she felt that she was 'chucked in at deep end' and struggled during her first years of studying at a conservatoire, she explained how she 'worked hard' and developed ways to get through, such as using technology to aid her dyslexia. Although she had made professional networks and had even been paid for performance work, she expressed deep concern about her future and ability to earn a living as a singer, calling it a 'extremely scary concept'. Aware of the expectation to do free and volunteered work during the early stages of her career to build her profile, she expressed not having 'the money or support network' to do this. As a mature student, she raised the uncertainty of how she might manage working in the music industry and having children, recalling a story from her head of studies who had given up her career as a performer when she started a family. Eventually Anastasia commented that 'I don't think the opera is inclusive enough for me. It's too hard to break in to when you haven't got the money'.*

Studies show how traits such as gender can influence career aspirations and decision-making (Ramaci et al., 2017). The story presented by Anastasia; a mature third year vocal student, with dyslexia and ADHD, and with Black Caribbean and White heritage highlights how intersectional aspects play a role in future career decisions.

Conservatoires act as a gateway for those hoping to make a living in the music industry therefore should be leading the change in better representation (Bull, 2019; Tregear et al., 2016).

For several students, the conservatoire validated their career decisions, giving them 'confidence' (Jacob) in their own abilities. Max described the conservatoire as a 'mini-society' and used it to judge his ability compared to his peers. As discussed by (Burnard, 2013) 'Higher music educators can significantly influence attitudes towards music learning and learners' motivation to learn...for understanding the music profession,

and by preparing musicians for careers in music.'(p. 4). For others, the conservatoire allowed them to considering a much wider range of career options than they initially imaged:

*Bela: I really thought that I was going to be an orchestral musician when I came here. And now I don't really want to do that anymore...I really like working in chamber groups. I really like playing non-classical music... I was exposed to other possibilities for what I could do, and I have more options*

*Nicole: There's so many options...I'd quite like to go into some sort of community outreach thing or like workshopping, maybe with a music service...more opportunities are kind of opened up a little bit since being here*

In contrast, the conservatoire made some students realise that they may hold unrealistic aspirations, calling it a 'fantasy' (Max) and being 'naïve' (Darcy) about the music industry. Part of this was down to learning more about the lifestyle and the financial viability of being a freelance musician:

Darcy: I had a few conversations with my one-on-one teacher about this [career in music] and she also told me about when she was my age and she went through a period where she couldn't afford to eat because she wanted to be a recitalist

As was the case with Anastasia, those without secure financial backing were concerned about the viability of a career in music. One student (Darcy) shared her reasons for choosing to step away from music:

Darcy: Not only would I not be able to live on a steady income for a long time, I have found that you need quite a specific personality to be able to deal with that and not become depressed. Some people in my year, and I really admire them for it, are super dedicated to singing and they don't mind that they're going to be poor for a few years because it means they get to sing. For me, it's more like "I like singing, but I don't want to be poor for it". So I think it really depends on your own goals on how much you're willing to give up.

This reflection demonstrated that she was not willing to sacrifice her own health and wellbeing, thus going against the dominant narrative of the 'tortured artist' as described in the literature review.

## Discussion

Bringing together the three fields identified in the literature review: access to music education, teaching and learning in music conservatoires, and equality, diversity and inclusion in the classical music industry, the discussion will centre on where the findings of this study contribute more understanding to the research questions presented at the start of the report:

1. Does socio-economic background influence undergraduate students' access to music education prior to studying at the conservatoire?
2. How do undergraduate music students from state school backgrounds experience studying at a conservatoire?
3. What role does socio-economic background play in conservatoire undergraduate students' imagined futures and career aspirations?

## Access to music education

In response to the first research question: 'Does socio-economic background influence undergraduate students' access to music education prior to studying at the conservatoire?', this research demonstrated that even students from new middle-class backgrounds who had attended state schools or faced financial barriers, felt at a disadvantage when comparing themselves to other students who had attended national level ensembles or specialist music schools. Knowing from prior research the financial barriers to music education, this raises further questions as to how those from working-class backgrounds may get by at a UK Conservatoire. Those who did not have access to higher level music education programmes, often due to cost (Figure 5), felt as if they needed to "catch-up" to their peers, with some experiencing imposter syndrome. This seemed most prevalent when students reflected on their first year of study, signifying this as a pivotal time in developing students' confidence and ability, as also echoed in a study by Burt and Mills (2006).

The findings of this research particularly emphasise the importance of attending an out-of-school music centre or junior conservatoire in not only guiding students' decision to study music at undergraduate level, but also in supporting them in knowing

what to expect at the audition and during the degree. This provided them with an advantage, not only in their technical skills, but their knowledge of 'the customs of the institutions' (Fiorentino, 2020: 151), and the cultural capital expected from an 'ideal classical music student' (Prokop and Reitsamer, 2023). As voiced by Bull (2018): 'Participation in young music courses and ensembles during teenage years appeared to exert a strong influence on young people's decision-making and a formative effect on their identities' (p. 88). These expected standards embody middle-class values therefore privilege the middle-classes, meaning that those from working-class backgrounds may find themselves 'out of the game', and 'unable to connect with a world which was already strange for them' (Grenfell and Hardy, 2007: 55). Future research conducted with music students from working-class backgrounds would illuminate further barriers to accessing music education.

## Teaching and learning in music conservatoires

When addressing the second research questions: 'How do undergraduate music students from state school backgrounds experience studying at a conservatoire?' it was illuminating to see that the participants almost exclusively talked about their experience of one-to-one lessons. Despite an abundance of recent research investigating instrumental teaching in higher music education, the findings raise questions as to how instrumental teaching reinforce 'legitimised traditions' (Rostvall and West, 2003: 214) and cultural practices (Giroux, 1985; Lave and Wenger, 2005). For some students, conservatoire teaching had a transformational effect on their educational journey, but for others, their experiences were incredible difficult, even discouraging them from wanting to continue music beyond their degree. As Taylor explained: 'some [teachers] get away with far more than they should be able to'.

Students discussed the high pressure and sense of competition they experience whilst studying at the conservatoires with some viewing themselves as solely responsible for their development, or lack of. Interestingly the three, white, cis male interview participants appeared most committed to this individualistic and meritocratic view of progress, as expressed by interview participant Max: 'I was just not as good because I didn't work as hard... I've got no excuses.' O'Brien, Brook, and Taylor (2018) argue that due to success being placed onto individuals within the arts, inequalities can be

difficult to not only recognise but also change. Thus, institutions are not held accountable.

It was especially difficult for students whose identities were intrinsically linked to being a musician, thus making it hard for them to deal with falling behind and struggling with their studies, or even considered giving up music. As Bull (2018) explains: 'not only had they [students] internalised the identity of being a classical musician, they had also invested their whole lives in it' (p. 87). The lack of regulation and pedagogical training of one-to-one teachers within conservatoires was raised as a major concern, especially when supporting students from diverse musical backgrounds and neurodiversity.

## **Equality, diversity and inclusion in the classical music industry**

The findings of this scoping study elicit some interesting discussion points in relation to the final research question: 'What role does socio-economic background play in conservatoire undergraduate students' imagined futures and career aspirations?' Conservatoires act as gatekeepers to the classical music industry and have to been argued to continue to reproduce 'class and status group distinction' (Burnard, 2012: 23). What this research uncovered was that financial security was a major concern for some of the students in this study and influenced their decisions to step away from a career in music. One student expressed that a career in music might be possible but depended on 'how much are you willing to give up?' (Darcy) refereeing to sacrificing financial security, social and family responsibilities and mental health. An unforeseen topic raised during the study was the attention on mental health. Although not directly asked during the interview, many students openly discussed their challenges and it was clear that for some, the apprehension regarding an uncertain career within the arts made them reconsider their career choices choosing instead to prioritise their mental health and wellbeing. In contrast other students from more affluent backgrounds did not express the same level of concerns, as one survey respondent put: 'I have enough wealth in my family to not need a high paying job for survival [making music] a sustainable career option'.

Questions arose as what conservatoire education was preparing undergraduate students for. Bull (2019) argues institutions should be leading the change (p. xiv) reading quality, diversity and inclusion. One example from the findings questioned the emphasis on principal study when many professional musicians undertake portfolio careers and can be expected to be 'musically multi-lingual, working in multiple genres' (Bennett, 2008: 72). This focus on principal study perhaps disadvantages certain students with a more diverse musical background.

The final area that was raised in this study was how intersectionality can play a role in making future career decisions (Coz and Kilshaw, 2021), as illustrated by the Anastasia's vignette. Additional reflection and action are needed regarding the place of the conservatoire in a post pandemic, #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo world.



## Conclusion & Recommendations

The key findings from this study highlight several areas for consideration for conservatoire leaders, teaching staff, and music education stakeholders. Firstly, access to prior high-level musical education influenced how prepared conservatoire students felt when auditioning and starting their degree. What happens in music education effects the talent pipeline (Arts Council England, 2014), including who gains a place to study at a conservatoire and who can enter the music industry. There are examples of successful teaching and widening participation at conservatoires, as with the transitions programme at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (Bull et al., 2022), but more can be done to share good practice and take a collective approach to challenging facing music education in the UK. With continued cuts to music education, especially in state schools, music education is not equitable, raising concerns that access to higher music education will become reserved for those who can afford it. This study demonstrated how even students from middle-class backgrounds faced challenges and concerns about the viability of music as a career. On top of this, students who had to take on part-time employment to support themselves, reported additional challenges, potentially compounding issues for those who already felt they had to “catch-up” to peers who had prior access to specialist music education.

Secondly were the reports of high-pressured environments and expectations placed on conservatoire students. Although some students thrived in this environment believing this to be the only way to progress in music, for others it was detrimental to their wellbeing and enjoyment of music. This was particularly difficult for those experiencing mental health challenges, with additional learning needs or neurodivergence, and those whose identity was centred around being a musician. Within discussions of conservatoire teaching, concerns regarding potentially abusive behaviours were raised and warrant further exploration (inter alia: Bull, 2021).

In response to the findings of this scoping study, the following recommendations for conservatoires are given below.

1. Given the participants’ concerns with not being prepared well for the conservatoire, conservatoire leaders must reflect on audition processes to take into consideration students who come from a wide range of musical

backgrounds. Training, such as unconscious bias, having a diverse panel of judges, and contextual admissions practices described as: 'taking an individualised approach to admissions that enabled recognition of a wider range of forms of prior learning/ability, and implementing a bespoke programme to address issues with the pipeline into music (Bull et al., 2022: 133), should be considered.

2. Conservatoires must recognise that the first year of study, especially for undergraduate students who come from less privileged backgrounds, is a pivotal time in building their confidence and musical skills. Institutions could consider running transitional programmes (or expanding existing programmes) that support the progression to conservatoire education for undergraduate students who have not previously attended advanced level music education programmes such as junior conservatoires.
3. Conservatoires need to be proactive in supporting positive teaching and learning cultures, including ensuring students feel confident to raise concerns about abusive behaviour from staff where necessary. Pedagogical training of all one-to-one principal study staff music must be implemented, with opportunities for further professional development available, especially when working with students from diverse educational backgrounds, neurodiversity, and supporting students experiencing mental health challenges. Peer observation schemes (Purser, 2005) could be developed and expanded to create a culture of support and sharing good practice without 'fear of humiliation' (p.296). Hourly-paid staff should be remunerated for their time attending such training.
4. In light of preparing students for a changing classical music industry, reflection on the conservatoire model of education should continue, reconsidering the weighting placed upon principal study. Ethical assessment, as defined by the University of Manchester as: *'the processes of assessment should be fair and transparent, and must not discriminate according to gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion or belief, age, class or disability'* (online) could be considered when setting assessment tasks and marking criteria.
5. Conservatoires can be at the forefront of change and inclusivity within the classical music industry. Sharing of good practices around equality, diversity

and inclusion, should be encouraged between conservatoires staff, as well as across higher music education institutions, education stake-holders and industry leaders.

Given the difficulties of accessing working-class music undergraduate students for this study, further research is recommended with hard-to-reach unrepresented groups within UK conservatoires, ensuring pathways into music remain accessible to all. As I write this report, I am living through the ramifications of the closure to the performing arts department at the University of Wolverhampton, which serves majority first generation and working-class students. Access to the arts and music are being narrowed, and as potentially more closures occur, places like conservatoires may have to widen their reach. I hope this report contributes to the ongoing discussions around equality, diversity and inclusion in music education and the classical music industry, enabling further discussion, action, and research into this under-researched area.

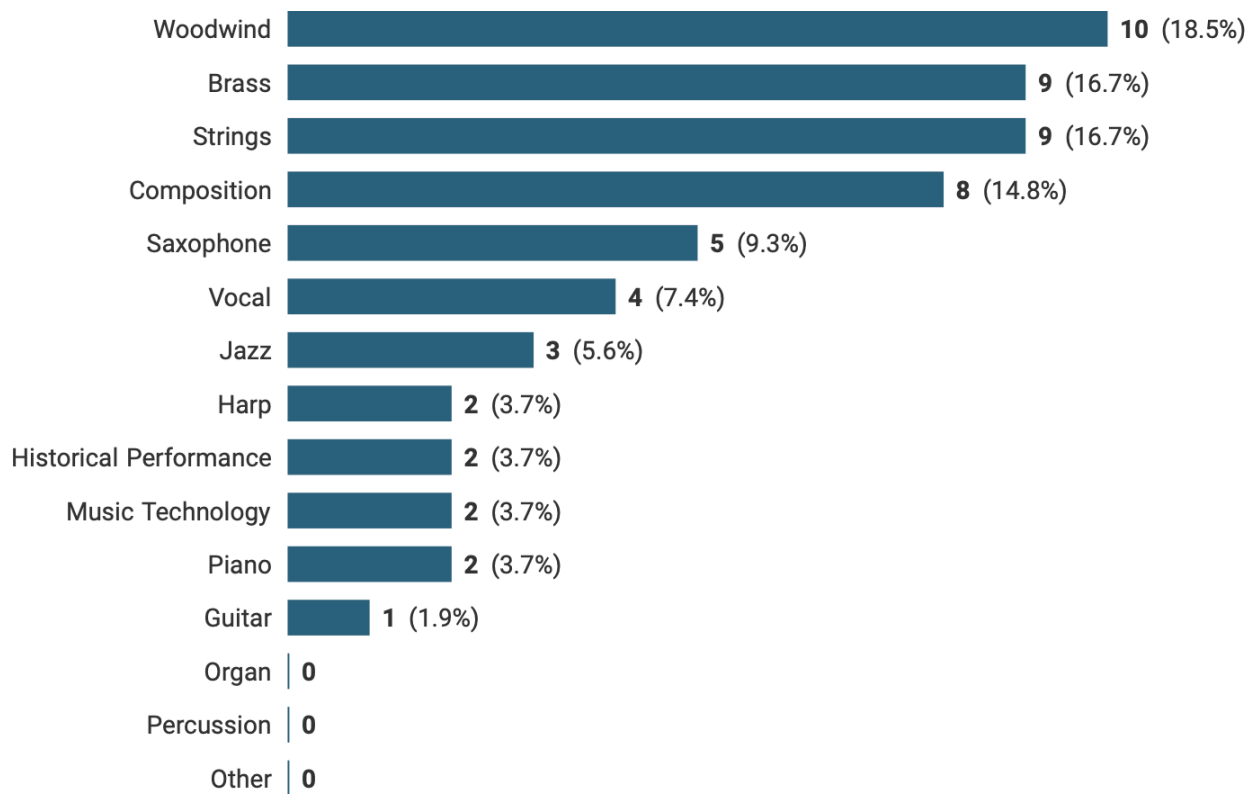
# Appendices

## A. Survey participant information

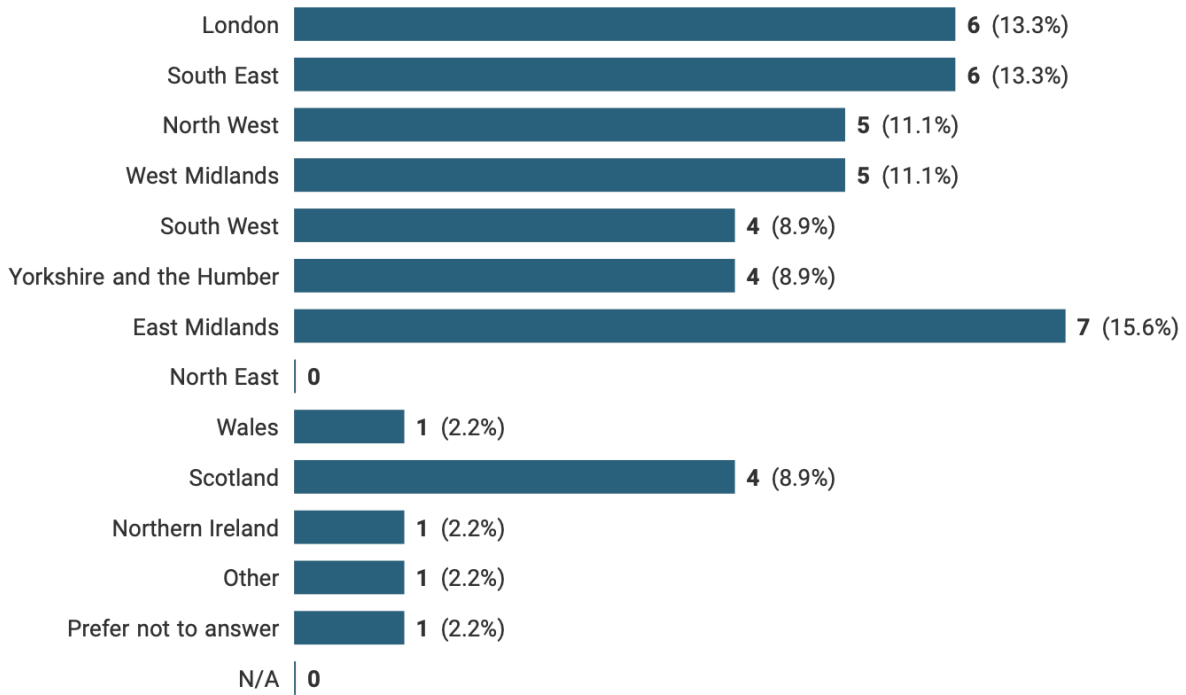
### Survey respondents by undergraduate year group



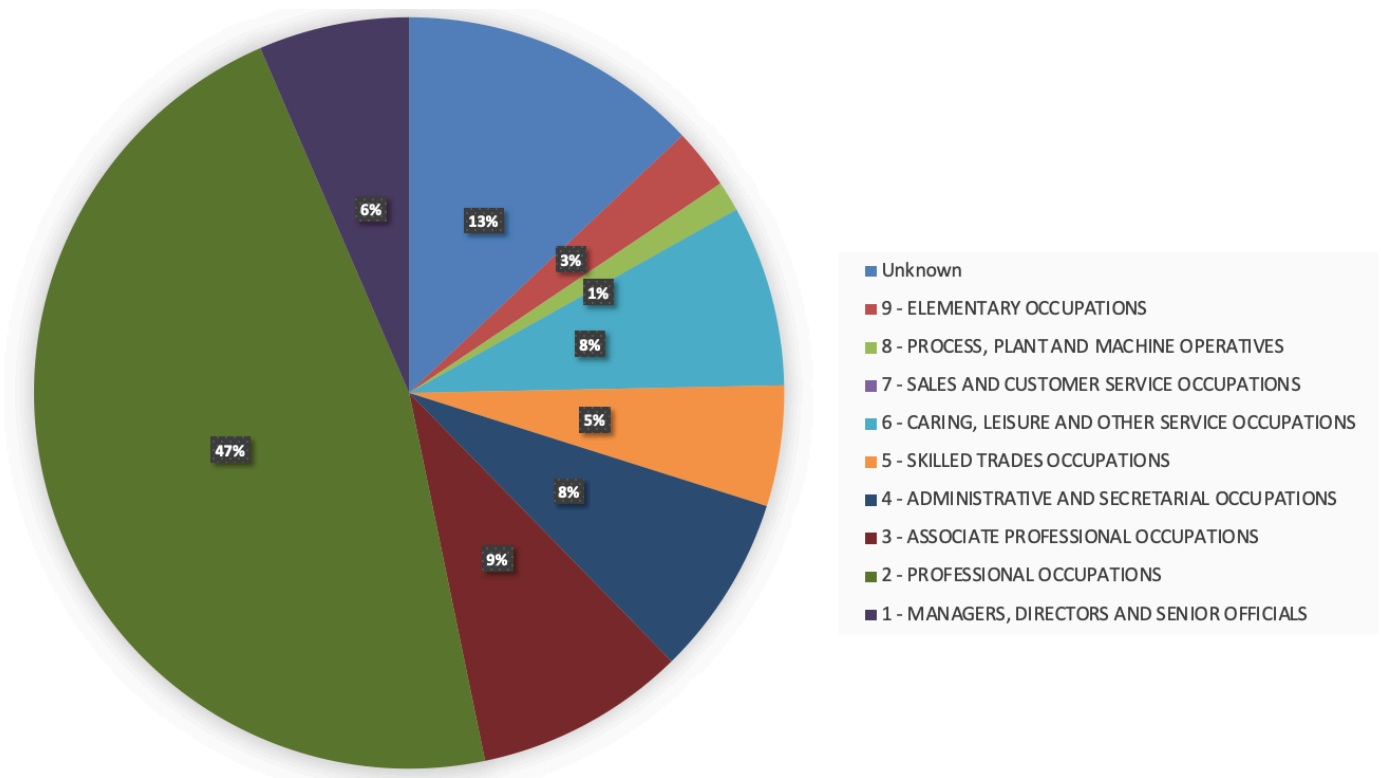
### Survey respondents by principal study course



### Location of survey respondents



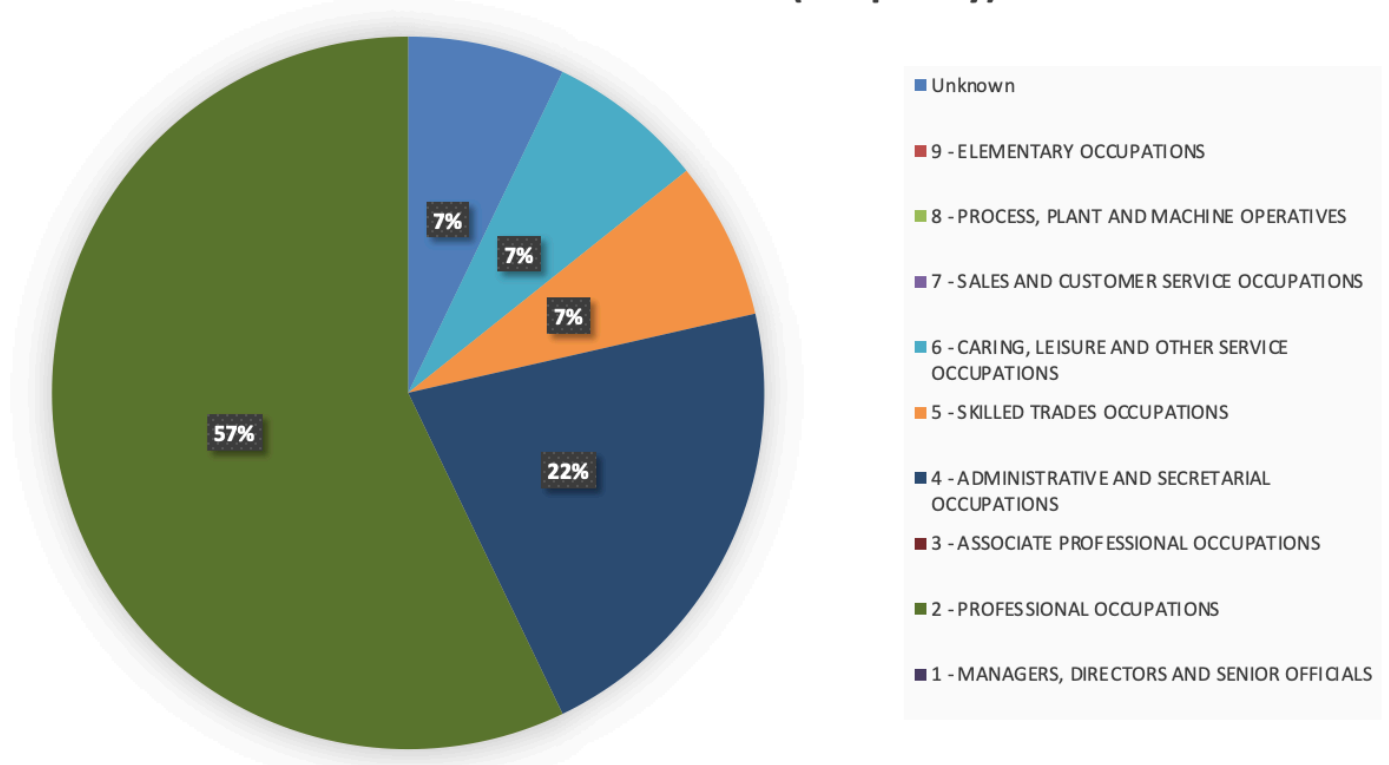
### Survey respondents by parental occupations



## B. Interview participant data

Interview respondents by parental occupations

Job classification SOC 2020 (Frequency)



## C. Coding of interviews

Code	Core Theme / Subcategory
<b>1</b>	<b>Prior Knowledge of the Conservatoire</b>
1.1	<i>Networks (word of mouth)</i>
1.2	<i>Inspiring musicians or music teachers</i>
1.3	<i>Choosing a conservatoire</i>
<b>2</b>	<b>Support for Music Education</b>
2.1	<i>Parental Encouragement</i>
2.2	<i>Cost of lessons/instruments</i>
2.3	<i>Music education opportunities ("Lucky")</i>
2.4	<i>Part-time work</i>

<b>3 Music as a part of their identity</b>
3.1 <i>Only musician in school "special status"</i>
3.2 <i>Music as 'safe space'</i>
<b>4 "Catching up"</b>
4.1 <i>Feeling behind peers</i>
4.2 <i>Auditions</i>
4.3 <i>"Didn't work as hard" - viewed it as their own fault for not being "good enough"</i>
4.4 <i>Having different teachers &amp; skills to peers</i>
4.5 <i>Importance of Junior conservatoires/music schools</i>
<b>5 Teaching &amp; Learning at the Conservatoire</b>
5.1 <i>Independent learning</i>
5.2 <i>Expectations of teaching 1</i>
5.3 <i>Training of conservatoire tutors</i>
5.4 <i>Pressure to succeed/competition within the conservatoire</i>
<b>6 Concepts of Inclusivity</b>
6.1 <i>Barriers to getting into the conservatoire</i>
6.2 <i>Conservatoire as an inclusive space</i>
6.3 <i>Lack of diverse students</i>
6.4 <i>Assessment at the conservatoire</i>
<b>7 Careers</b>
7.1 <i>Imagined (unrealistic) futures</i>
7.2 <i>Opening doors to other possibilities</i>
7.3 <i>Concerned about lack of money in a music career</i>
7.4 <i>Conservatoire validating their skills/futures</i>
7.5 <i>"Generalist" vs. soloist musician</i>
7.6 <i>Wanting to give up</i>

## D. Example of interview coding

2.2 / 4.1	I mean it's different because I didn't come from like a rich background. I have to, you know, pay for my own singing lessons and stuff like that. So it's what I could afford. I couldn't afford piano lessons past a certain point because my parents couldn't afford it. I paid for my singing lessons cause I found that that was something that, you know, I was investing in myself
	<b>KD (Interviewer):</b>
	Thinking back the Conservatoire and the tutors there, do you think they have sort of supported you with sort of additional needs and like with your ADHD, is that been something that you have felt supported there?
	<b>Interviewee</b>
6.3 / 5.3  5.3 / 6.3	It's been a kind of mixed bag, so um, it's a how to? ADHD isn't something that's - it's kind of new to people. I mean, when I was first tested for ADHD, the person said that I didn't have ADHD and I'm textbook like it's - At <u>first</u> I didn't know I had ADHD was only diagnosed last year, so it's been a kind of learning curb and I've really struggled this year because Um the to begin with - I would say the teachers have been brilliant. <b>One of the teachers is really helped me. But their disability services um, when I first began, I haven't been offered the support that I - I wasn't given the support that I needed.</b> And <u>so</u> I've been really, really struggling and it's only now that the disability services has changed over to somebody else and they're like and I've gone down to him. I <u>said</u> . You know, "I really need support, why can't I get the support?" And he's like, "well, that's really odd because of the you're getting your funding for this. Like we have this <u>information</u> and the services are actually available to you and you've not been receiving it". And so now when I go <u>back</u> I'm <u>gonna</u> have that support but it was <b>actually one of the head of vocal studies that was helping me. She found out that I'm struggling,</b> and so she was instead of, you know, and she's a very busy woman. <b>She didn't really have the time to be offering me that support, but she did.</b> <u>So</u> it's it's really kind of her.



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