

The DIY careers of young classical musicians in neoliberal times

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journals.sagepub.com/home/diy**Rainer Prokop  and Rosa Reitsamer**

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Abstract

This article seeks to deepen our understanding of the do-it-yourself (DIY) careers of a younger generation of classically trained musicians in the context of the neoliberal transformation of higher music education and music labour markets. Drawing on 46 interviews with white middle-class students and graduates of the three public, state-funded higher music education institutions in Austria, we examine how these artists seek to advance their careers as orchestral musicians, soloists or chamber musicians and manage the entrepreneurialism, competitiveness and precariousness that underpin the classical music labour market. Our study shows that the musicians cultivate an entrepreneurial ethos, but also adopt alternative cultural practices that promote collectivity, solidarity and care for one another. In these processes, the DIY ethos takes on a double meaning: It is adapted by the young musicians to neoliberal rationality, while also being fundamental for initiating, organising and managing small DIY music projects, festivals and cultural initiatives.

Keywords

classical musicians, DIY careers, neoliberalism, study-to-work transition, competition, gender

Introduction

This article considers the do-it-yourself (DIY) careers of a small group of young, white middle-class students and graduates of the three public, state-funded higher music education institutions in Austria in the context of the neoliberal transformation of higher music education and the classical music labour market. This transformation has led some scholars to discuss musicians' careers as 'portfolio careers' in order to emphasise the heterogeneous ways in which graduates of higher music and art education institutions make a living by working within and outside of music labour markets (e.g. Bartleet et al., 2012; Bennett, 2008). Drawing upon this research, we will use the term DIY career to illuminate the importance of DIY practice for a younger generation of classically trained musicians as they transition from study to professional working life. In contrast to graduates of higher music education institutions in Austria in the

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1970s and 1980s, this generation hardly ever finds permanent employment with an orchestra or a music theatre, but is forced to make a living as self-employed artists (Bork, 2010). We conducted 46 in-depth interviews with students and graduates to show how this younger generation manages the entrepreneurialism, competitiveness and precariousness that underpin the classical music labour market and attempts to advance a career as orchestral musician, soloist or chamber musician shortly before or a few years after graduation. Following a brief discussion of classical music, neoliberalism and DIY and the introduction of our research methodology, the article is divided into three parts, each presenting snapshots of the musicians' career advancements. The first part considers the musicians' self-portrayals as self-investing, entrepreneurial individuals and demonstrates how they adopt a DIY approach to engage in different forms of self-optimisation and construct a distinct and coherent artistic identity. In the next part, we explore the different ways in which the female and male study participants deal with the competitiveness prevalent at music competitions and auditions and outline the gendered dimensions of a DIY practice that works on a supportive level. The final part sheds light on the strategies used by artists to manage their precarious working lives.

Classical music, neoliberalism and DIY

For at least the past 10 years, there has been an increasing use of the term DIY in relation to music practice. As a consequence, scholars have adopted the term as a useful signifier for analysing the careers of musicians and other creative individuals who acquire their skills in local youth-oriented popular music scenes and invest their cultural work in scene-supporting music industries. The career trajectories of these individuals and their transition pathways from education to work often happen outside the 'official' youth transition spaces such as schools and universities and even the conventional labour market (e.g. Bennett, 2018; Reitsamer and Prokop, 2018; White, 2017). This emerging research on DIY careers contributes to the growing literature on the transitions of young creatives from higher education to work in the cultural industries that explores their non-linear transition pathways, which involve extended transition periods, multiple entry attempts, spells of unemployment, self-employment, short-term contracts and part-time employment within and outside the cultural and creative industries (e.g. Bridgstock, 2009; Haukka, 2011). Since the early 1990s, young classically trained musicians in Austria increasingly share these transitional paths with other cultural workers due to both a rising number of graduates of higher music education institutions as well as the neoliberalisation of the classical music labour market, which is manifest in, among other aspects, the restructuring of orchestras, music theatres and other traditional institutions that have conventionally offered (permanent) employment for classically trained musicians, and an increase of self-employed and precarious work (Bork, 2010).

Higher music education institutions have reacted to the neoliberal transformation of labour markets with the introduction of entrepreneurship curricula, aimed at teaching students how to develop strong, adaptable and entrepreneurial career identities and create arts employment for themselves in order to counter the realities of the shrinking labour market (e.g. Essig 2017). However, as Moore (2016) notes, these curricula and the aligned promotion of portfolio careers habituate music students to the precariousness and insecurity of the labour market and 'preclude the development of alternative models or areas of inquiry and indeed make a search for alternatives seem unnecessary' (p. 39). Accordingly, music entrepreneurship and portfolio careers have become the 'new' way for graduates to transition from studies to work and to pursue a career in the highly competitive, individualised and precarious music labour market. This turn towards music entrepreneurship and portfolio careers marks a stark break with the overwhelming majority of higher music education programmes, which remain solely focused on teaching skills on instruments and the interpretation of works by white male composers of the past era, and which prepare students 'for

nineteenth rather than twenty-first century careers and working environments' (Bartleet et al., 2012: 36). Consequently, the classical music profession today is defined by two career models: The careers of employed orchestral musicians and opera singers, which have become the outdated model, and portfolio careers and music entrepreneurship, which should compensate for the shrinking employment opportunities available to a younger generation of classically trained musicians.

Against the background of these neoliberal transformations, we consider how a small group of white middle-class students and graduates of the three public higher music education institutions in Austria is attempting to advance their careers as orchestral musicians, soloist performers or chamber musicians shortly before or a few years after graduation. We ask how these musicians navigate and rationalise the process of becoming entrepreneurs of the self and what entrepreneurial and alternative cultural practices they employ to manage the competitiveness, entrepreneurialism and precariousness prevalent on the classical music labour market. We draw upon an understanding of neoliberalism that refers to Foucault's (2008) notion of neoliberalism as a new form of governmentality. In this perspective, neoliberalism is not only a purely economic project or a political economy, but a rationality of contemporary capitalism (Brown, 2015; Dardot and Laval, 2013). This rationality comprises a set of discourses and practices that entails a reformulation of all individual and institutional actions as 'rational entrepreneurial action' (Brown, 2015) and generalises 'competition as a behavioural norm' and 'the enterprise as a model of subjectivation' (Dardot and Laval, 2013: 14). Neoliberal governmentality thus works by encouraging individuals to become an entrepreneur of the self, which involves investing work in the self and engaging in competition, strategic planning, self-management and forms of self-optimisation, ready to manage one's own career and life without relying on the state.

Numerous scholars have shown that cultural workers have been positioned as 'model entrepreneurs' because 'they prize freedom, autonomy and choice [...] and] pursue self-employment and entrepreneurship in a spirit of self-exploration and self-fulfilment' (Leadbeater and Oakley, 1999: 15). However, the responses of classical musicians to neoliberalism's call to become an 'entrepreneurial self' (Bröckling, 2016) have only recently become the subject of academic interest. Ritchey (2019) examined how music practitioners in the United States have transformed classical music in accordance with neoliberal values as a means of survival. She explores, among other examples, the practices of a small group of white middle- and upper-class musicians who became known as 'indie classical' artists for adopting indie rock's DIY ethos to compose 'cutting edge' new music, which they release on self-founded independent record labels and perform for audiences unfamiliar with classical music. Ritchey's analysis draws attention to the ambivalences and contradictions of the new entrepreneurial DIY careers by showing that these artists promote neoliberal individualism and entrepreneurship while at the same time emphasising the importance of community. Ritchey's musicological study resonates with Scharff's (2018) empirical study on the working lives of female classical music professionals living in London, UK, and Berlin, Germany. Scharff provides detailed insights into the ways in which these young women negotiate and live out entrepreneurial subjectivity. However, as Scharff found, they are 'not wholly subject to entrepreneurial rhetoric' (p. 126) because they reject self-promotion as well as pushy and competitive behaviour. Resonating with other recent studies (e.g. Alacovska, 2022; Banks, 2007; Coulson, 2012), Ritchey's and Scharff's analyses demonstrate that neoliberal subjecthood in a broader sense can never be fully realised, and musicians can challenge, disrupt and reject the individualised, instrumental and competitive logic of entrepreneurialism by adopting discourses and practices that promote collectivity, solidarity and care for each other and support local communities.

This article aims to contribute to these discussions by highlighting entrepreneurial as well as alternative cultural practices used by a younger generation of classically trained musicians in Austria to advance their careers and manage their precarious working lives. Consequently, our analysis of the interviews with 46 students and graduates draws attention to three aspects of these young musicians' careers, which are

crucially based on a DIY practice, as they have to bear the responsibility for a successful transition from higher music education to professional life themselves. The first aspect concerns the musicians' self-portrayals as self-investing entrepreneurial subjects. These self-portrayals came to the fore in the analysis of their accounts of their artistic training, the forms of self-optimisation they employ to compete professionally on the labour market and the ways they forge a distinct and coherent artistic identity to adapt their DIY practice to neoliberal rationality (part 1). The second part deals with the different strategies used by our male and female interview partners to deal with the competitiveness and rivalry between musicians at music competitions and auditions and highlights the gendered dimensions of a DIY practice that amount to alternative cultural practices and work on a supportive level (part 2). The third aspect explores the ways in which the study participants manage their precarious, unstable and insecure working lives, which include, among other strategies, the cultivation of an entrepreneurial ethos and the foundation of small DIY music projects (part 3).

Methodological approach

The data presented here is part of a broader ongoing research project on higher music education and the working lives of a younger generation of classically trained musicians in Austria, funded by the mdw – University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna since 2019. It comprises 46 in-depth interviews with instrumentalists, singers, composers and conductors who, at the time of our conversations, were between 25 and 37 years of age and had graduated within the past 6 years from one of the three public, state-funded higher music education institutions in Austria or were studying in their final year. The 23 women and 23 men are white and middle class, which resonates with the historical and contemporary conflation of classical music with white middle- and upper-class culture (Bull, 2019; Scharff, 2018; Yang 2007); about half are Austrian, while the other half came from other European countries. Apart from three musicians who held permanent positions with orchestras, all worked as self-employed artists and had multiple jobs, including performing, teaching or administrating self-initiated music projects. We refer to these self-employed trajectories as DIY careers, albeit some study participants aspired to orchestral positions, while others, not least because of their instrument choices (e.g. piano or voice), pursued careers as soloists or chamber musicians, based at all times predominantly on self-employment and seasonal/short-term contracts with music theatres. The DIY careers of these study participants reflect the norm on the classical music labour market in Austria since the early 1990s, following the international trend of the neoliberal restructuring of the music and cultural industries. After our study participants agreed to the data protection policy and answered a short questionnaire on their biographical data, we recorded their in-depth interviews, which were later fully transcribed. They were asked to recount their biographies as classically trained musicians, beginning with learning a music instrument in childhood and entering higher music education as a young adult to transitioning into professional working life in the present. They described the support they received from their parents and/or teachers, the challenges they experienced during higher music education and the strategies they deployed to enter the classical music labour market under conditions of precarity.

For this article, we used the qualitative coding methods described by Charmaz (2014) to examine the study participants' responses to neoliberalism's call to become entrepreneurs of the self. We first analysed each transcript, establishing categories according to the themes highlighted by the study participants. These categories included, among other things, musical socialisation and higher music education, which are only marginally addressed in this article, as well as performing, teaching, self-optimisation, competitiveness, collegiality and support, aesthetic experiences, DIY music projects and alternative economies. In a second stage of analysis, we compared these categories across the 46 transcripts to identify similarities and differences between the study participants' narratives. This analysis revealed that the study participants not only affirmed, but also disrupted and rejected models of entrepreneurship, and that gender plays an important role in these processes, where the notion of DIY takes on various meanings.

Transitioning from higher music education to professional working life

The transition from higher education to work is an important phase for musicians as they shape their artistic identities and career paths on a precarious music labour market (cf., e.g. Creech et al., 2008). In their study on the transition pathways of young pianists from student to working life, Juuti and Littleton (2012) found that this phase involves a redefinition of musicianship as it actively encouraged the young musicians to reflect on their artistic learning process and to open up to new influences and ways of defining themselves as professional musicians. This also includes, as Schediwy et al. (2018: 175) note, that from the moment young musicians ‘want to become professionals and make a living out of their creative practice, they need to confront the market and understand themselves to be its subject’. All of our study participants told us about their artistic training and demonstrated a strong orientation towards the classical music labour market. Sebastian articulated this view as such:

For me, the studies were really important to learn the instrument on a very professional and very high level. That’s the basic framework ... the technical skills ... and if that’s not very good, it will collapse sooner or later. If something only works sixty percent of the time or only every fourth day, it’s not useful for professional life. And now, I still have to work on it and see that I improve it even more.

Similarly, Diana stated:

It only makes sense to study piano at this high level if you have the prospect of a professional career and can make a living from it. I’ve known that since I was a child, when I started playing the piano, that passing the entrance exam doesn’t get the ball rolling on its own. You have to become active yourself.

Feher (2009: 30–31) notes that neoliberalism recognises individuals only ‘as producers, as entrepreneurs of themselves or, more precisely, as investors in themselves, as human capital that wishes to appreciate and to value itself and thus allocate its skills accordingly’. Consequently, higher education is first and foremost desired and valued for its contribution to human capital, rather than for ‘developing the capacities of citizens, sustaining culture, knowing the world, or envisioning and crafting different ways of life in common’ (Brown, 2015: 177–178). The quotes from Diana and Sebastian suggest that they have adopted these neoliberal discourses: They consider their study of a classical music instrument as work on the self, constantly being active and improving their skills, and as an investment in their future career as professional musicians. They thus portray themselves as self-investing, entrepreneurial musicians who have been playing an instrument since childhood, have passed the entry exam at a higher music education institution and now see their own worth in relation to the labour market.

Resonating with broader studies of creative workers’ non-linear transition pathways (e.g. Bridgstock, 2009; Haukka, 2011), our study participants considered their transitions not as a specific event, but as a process that already began during their studies. Isabell, who aspired to a career as a concert pianist, said: ‘We don’t study and then our career begins. We regularly give concerts and take part in music competitions’. And Otto, echoing Isabell’s view, told us:

If you decide at the end of your studies that you want to be an orchestral musician, then it’s too late. We go to auditions from our third year of study because otherwise we’ll never find a job with an orchestra.

Study participants understood auditions as one of the few opportunities to achieve economic stability and security through a permanent position with an orchestra or a music theatre, while they saw music competitions as a way to introduce themselves to a wider audience and/or to launch a career as a soloist performer. However, they were all aware of the difficulties associated with pursuing a career in the classical music

profession, including the competitiveness that prevails at auditions and music competitions. Thomas told us about the competition at auditions for permanent positions with the Vienna Philharmonic:

When my teacher auditioned for a position with the Vienna Philharmonic in the early 1980s, there were eight musicians, and he was the only one who played well. Today, there are more than two hundred musicians applying from all over the world, and they all play very well and easily meet the requirements. The competition has become very, very big, and you have to be very good and competitive to get a job.

In order to be able to compete professionally on the labour market, study participants deploy various forms of self-optimisation, which crucially depend on their ability to conceive of the self as a project to be self-governed by constantly working on and improving it and by setting new goals (Bröckling, 2016). Self-optimisation is thus crucially based on an efficient organisation of one's own life and a DIY approach that has to be adapted to neoliberal rationality, in which self-optimisation 'implies the need to make comparisons, which in turn entails a general state of competition' (Bröckling, 2016: 35). Ingmar told us about the forms of self-optimisation he uses to prepare for auditions for positions with orchestras. He said that he starts preparing for an audition at least 6 months in advance, which includes practising the works at least 6 hours a day, as well as not drinking alcohol for 3 weeks before the audition, eating healthy, taking magnesium to prevent cramps while playing and getting enough sleep to be 'in top shape and playing exceptionally well at the audition' (Ingmar). Cosima mentioned similar forms of self-optimisation in our conversation about her regular attendance of music competitions. As the following statement demonstrates, she sees her DIY approach to preparing for music competitions as a strategy that serves her self-optimisation:

I have to prepare mentally, and I have to be physically fit. I can't practice ten hours a day before the competition and then be exhausted at the competition. On the day of the competition, I always sleep in the afternoon to charge my batteries. But it's really a whole strategy that I've learned and that I use.

By describing various forms of physical, mental and psychological self-optimisation, Ingmar and Cosima provide insights into the way in which they perceive themselves as a project and deploy a DIY approach to promote their competitiveness, which is an important quality of entrepreneurial subjectivity (Bröckling, 2016) and which should increase their chances of success in music competitions and auditions.

In addition to regularly participating in music competitions and auditions, study participants emphasised the importance of developing a distinct and coherent artistic identity in order to enter the labour market and find work as a self-employed artist. Laura, a harpist, said:

Creating an artistic identity is very important because you can only get gigs when people get the impression that you have an identity as artist. It's like a pop artist creating his own brand. For me, an artistic identity is really about doing gigs that I believe in, and for an audience that I've created, and with transcriptions that I've made.

Florian expressed a similar sentiment:

I need to have an identity as a pianist, which means that I have a repertoire to present myself as an expert. And I definitely need to work on that to sell myself to concert promoters and increase the number of my concert appearances.

Laura and Florian are taking an entrepreneurial stance by articulating their desire to develop a distinct and coherent artistic identity that should attract the attention of audiences and that can be 'sold' to concert promoters. However, the work they invest in developing their artistic identities is based on their passion for creative work (see also McRobbie, 2016) as well as a DIY practice that manifests itself in searching for

works by particular composers and appropriating them by developing their own interpretations. Eikhof and Haunschild (2006) have argued that artists tend to consider their artistic identities as inclusive of business-related aspects, since ‘they perceive themselves as involved in the production of art for art’s sake and at the same time manage themselves as market subjects’ (p. 234). The statements of our study participants support this finding, but with an emphasis on the importance of DIY: They portray themselves as self-investing entrepreneurial musicians and refer to themselves as if they were a commodity or brand while simultaneously being driven by an ‘affective attachment’ (McRobbie, 2016) to music making and deploying a DIY approach to engage in diverse forms of self-optimisation and to create a distinct and coherent artistic identity, aiming to increase their ‘competitive edge on the market place’ (Bröckling, 2016: 33). In so doing, study participants adapt their DIY practice to neoliberal rationality, which resonates with the broader absorption of DIY discourses and practices by capitalism. As we will show in the following, for women, DIY practice can also work on a supportive level to deal with competitive behaviour.

The gendered dimensions of DIY practice and competition

Several scholars have highlighted the gendered dimension of DIY practice by drawing attention to the significant underrepresentation of women at all levels of cultural production in popular music scenes (e.g. Cohen, 1997). This section sheds light on the gendered dimensions of DIY practice in the classical music profession, which became clear in our analysis of the study participants’ accounts of the competitiveness underpinning the classical music labour market and the different strategies used by the women and men we interviewed to deal with the competition and rivalry between musicians at music competitions and auditions. In the classical music profession, the gendered division of labour manifests in a variety of ways, including the practice of symphony orchestras to employ a significantly higher proportion of white male than female players and the resistance of internationally prestigious orchestras such as the Vienna Philharmonic to the membership of women and musicians of colour (Cheng, 2020; Sergeant and Himonides, 2019). In order to attain these positions and/or to pursue a career as a soloist, numerous male study participants enthusiastically anticipated the entrepreneurial logic of constant competition, aiming to ‘beat’ other musicians. As Otto said, ‘For me, it makes the most sense to compare auditions with sports competitions and to prepare myself like an athlete because an audition is a knock-out procedure where I have to beat others to get the job’. Similarly, Sebastian stated, ‘I’m going to an audition soon, and I know a lot of people who will also be competing and I know how they play. And if everything is on track, I should beat them and get the job (*laughs*)’. And Hannes noted:

It’s really important that you participate in auditions and music competitions because you have to learn that competitive spirit, and after a while you know where you stand in the job market and who you have to compete with if you want to make a living as a musician.

As these quotes demonstrate, Otto, Sebastian and Hannes use their DIY practice to strengthen their competitive behaviour and to direct their competitiveness towards others, as well as to assess and evaluate their own performances at auditions and music competitions and their opportunities on the labour market in comparison to others. This negotiation of competition can be understood as a performance of masculinity that ‘is a vital aspect of entrepreneurial practices and processes’ (Lewis, 2014: 1854) and consequently underlies the neoliberal ideal of a successful career in the classical music profession, achieved through hard work, self-optimisation, the construction of a distinct artistic identity, and competitiveness. Mavin and Yusupova (2023: 882) argue that the neoliberal ideal of a successful career ‘comes in conflict with the normative ideal of noncompetitive femininity, leading to clashing expectations that women should and should not be competitive’. Several studies have shown that women, in negotiating these conflicting

expectations, engage in inner-directed self-competition, rather than in open competition with others (Mavin and Yusupova, 2023; McRobbie, 2015; Scharff, 2018). Resonating with these findings, Isabell said: ‘There is huge competitiveness and rivalry on the job market and especially at music competitions, where everyone is fighting to win the first prize. But I always compete with myself first because I want to become the best’. And Marie stated:

I can say for myself that I should have chosen the tempo better at the last concert and that I need to work more on the interpretation, but I can’t compare myself with others and I don’t need to see everyone as a competitor to become a better pianist.

Isabell and Marie turn competition inwards in order to assess their skills as musicians and strategically deploy forms of self-optimisation, aiming to do better or even to become ‘the best’. These portrayals of self-competition suggest that Isabell and Marie have found a way to embrace the competition that underpins the labour market and to confirm the neoliberal ideal of a successful career by competing with themselves. Some other female study participants aimed to disrupt the entrepreneurial logic of constant competition. Anna, reflecting on competing with friends when auditioning for a position with an orchestra, said:

When I realised that two of my best friends were also going to audition for the job, we decided to prepare for the audition together. We didn’t want to compete with each other because we founded an ensemble and are often performing together. We didn’t want to risk our friendship for an audition.

Anna refuses to compete with her friends and orients to practices of ‘commoning’, which are characterised, in part, by collaborations rooted in an alternative form of sociality, as they are held together by values of collectivity, solidarity and care for each other (Alacovska, 2022; Korczynski and Wittel, 2020). As Korczynski and Wittel (2020: 721) note, ‘commoning needs commoners who see each other as equals’ rather than as competitors and who create collaborations on a voluntary basis that goes beyond sheer collegiality between workers. Inge also orients herself to practices of commoning, stating, ‘instead of competing with each other, we went to the audition together and supported each other and said we’re happy if one of us gets the job’. And, she continued,

It’s important to have good relationships with other cellists because if someone can’t play a concert because he or she is sick, one of us can fill in, or if we know of jobs, we recommend each other. That’s how we try to turn competition into togetherness.

The practices of commoning described here point to an alternative form of sociality that was co-created by Anna and Inge and is closely aligned with an emancipatory DIY ethos and practice that manifests itself in the sharing of resources, expertise and stories, along with mutual help and alternative social engagement (Bennett and Guerra, 2019). Accordingly, Anna and Inge portray themselves in these quotes not as entrepreneurial subjects, but as individuals who act as friends and commoners and seek to advance their careers through collaboration, solidarity and caring for one another. Practices of commoning and a DIY or do-it-together (DIT) ethos, which musicians can adopt to challenge, subvert and reject models of entrepreneurship, circulate in many local music scenes. Toynbee (2000), in his study on local electronic dance music scenes, found ‘networking arrangements’ that can be considered practices of commoning and DIY because they are based on friendship, cohesion and collegiality, and represent ‘a softening of market relations’ (p. 155) as the musicians ‘operate in a domain where there is, at one and the same time, a multiplication of lateral transactions and an emphasis on trust and goodwill across networks’ (p. 155). Inge points to ‘networking arrangements’ by emphasising the importance of ‘good relationships with other cellists’, expressed

in caring for colleagues who are ill and helping one another to find work. Alacovska and Bissonnette (2021) coined the term ‘care for collegiality’ for these practices, as they are oriented towards friends, fellow workers and colleagues. Doris also emphasises ‘care for collegiality’, which, in her experience, is deeply embedded in the local baroque music scene and disrupts the competition and rivalry among musicians:

I have recently specialised more in baroque music because there is much less competition in this scene. I play a lot with musicians in different ensembles, which is fun because the people are very nice, and we support each other and are there for each other and care for each other (...). And that’s really much better than being surrounded by musicians who only compete with each other.

Female study participants’ accounts about practices of commoning and ‘care for collegiality’ (Alacovska and Bissonnette, 2021), as well as about their inner-directed self-competition, demonstrate that they employ different strategies to manage the competitiveness that is prevalent at auditions and music competitions than male study participants who told us that they openly engage in competition with other musicians and deploy a DIY practice to enhance their competitive spirit. These narratives support the findings of Scharff (2018) and Mavin and Yusupova (2021) that competitiveness is a gendered phenomenon and that women’s rejection of open competition with others can be read as a performance of femininity. However, the female study participants’ accounts about practices of commoning and care for collegiality break with the entrepreneurial logic of competition and resonate with a DIY practice that ‘serves as a counter-force to neoliberalism’ (Bennett and Guerra, 2019: 12), while their narratives of self-competition correspond with the neoliberal ideal of a successful career to be achieved through working hard on and competing with themselves.

Managing the precarious working life

Most recent studies explain the ability of cultural workers to accept precarious, insecure and flexible work and to persevere in their profession with reference to the autonomy of creative work, the proximity to fame and the pleasurable, absorbing and fulfilling experiences associated with music making and other creative activities (cf., e.g. Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Siciliano, 2021). The following short dialogue with Theresa illustrates how moments of ‘pleasurable absorption’ (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011) lead her to accept her precarious employment:

Theresa: Looking for jobs and uncertainty never stops when you’re a freelancer. This sounds terrible, but at the end of the day it’s still great to be a singer.

Interviewer: But what’s great about uncertainty?

Theresa: It’s not the poorly paid contract why I’m doing it (*laughs*). It’s this feeling of being on stage and singing for the audience and being able to convey something to the audience and to give something to the audience. That’s an unspeakably beautiful experience.

Theresa describes how the pleasurable absorption in the creative practice of singing offers her an opportunity to create an aesthetic dialogue with the audience and to connect in a sensual way. In these moments, Theresa develops an ‘aesthetic subjectivity’ (Siciliano, 2021) that is both expressive and fulfilling, and that breaks with the individualistic, competitive and instrumental logic of entrepreneurialism (see also Scharff, 2018). But it is precisely these experiences that bind Theresa to precarious working conditions.

Many study participants told us about moments of pleasurable absorption, but their strategies for dealing with their precarious, unstable and insecure working lives differed significantly. Some said that they were

financially supported by their parents and/or partners and therefore they ‘don’t have to take every job like many other musicians who have to play at weddings and so on to survive’ (Florian). Numerous others cultivated an entrepreneurial ethos as a response to precarious employment (see also Scharff, 2018). Marie said, ‘when you’re a freelance, you have to learn to live with uncertainty and you have to embrace it to a certain extent. But I’m still working on it (*laughs*)’. Gabriel made a similar statement:

I used to worry a lot during my studies if I will be able to enter the labour market and of course it’s not so easy to deal with it psychologically when I don’t have a job for several weeks or even months. But with time and the experiences I have made as a freelance conductor and violinist, I have understood that there is no point in worrying about the future and that I can deal with the situation much better if I think positively.

As these interview passages illustrate, employment insecurity is an existential precariousness of life that requires work on the self to overcome feelings of insecurity and worries about the future. While Anna is still struggling to embrace uncertainty, Gabriel has learned to ‘think positive’ in order to manage the unpredictability of work psychologically. Another aspect of the participants’ insecure, unstable and precarious working lives that required emotional work on the self was coping with the blurring of boundaries between work and leisure. Thomas said:

I’ve gotten used to it, not having any spare time, and I’ve stopped making plans for my spare time because everything always changes anyways. And spare time in most cases anyway means time to practise or to prepare for the next gig. And when I have time to meet friends, I quickly call and ask if they want to go for a beer.

Thomas portrays his life as restless and himself as constantly working, whereby his spare time is reduced to occasionally meeting friends on short notice. Emilia had already developed a more positive attitude about ‘not having a private hobby’ (Emilia), saying: ‘When I buy a dress, I think about whether I can wear it to my next concert, and when I do sports, I do it because it’s good for my singing voice. But I actually like it because I have it all in one’. By being willing to invest in the self in order to cope emotionally with the uncertainty and unpredictability of work and the aligned erosion of boundaries between work and play, Marie, Gabriel, Thomas and Emilia have cultivated an entrepreneurial ethos. Paula, however, decided towards the end of her studies to abandon her career as an opera singer:

At the end of my studies, I realised how demanding the profession is because I had to be very flexible and travel all the time, and I found that very exhausting after a while. And I had to constantly keep proving myself at auditions and competitions and I had to constantly promote my career to find work. All these things that other people find exciting, and they feel that’s their life, that’s stress for me, and I had to stop because I couldn’t rest anymore.

Paula told us that after having experienced ‘the bulimic patterns of working’ (Gill and Pratt, 2008: 14) of the classical music labour market, she started working part-time as a teacher at a music school, which allowed her to continue performing, ‘but without that constant pressure’ (Paula). Several study participants mentioned that they supplemented their low income from performing with teaching, which corresponds with Bennett’s (2007: 184) finding that ‘most musicians spend more time teaching than performing’. However, it was predominantly women who said that they put aside or even abandoned their careers as performers in favour of a permanent (part-time) position with a local music school. In our conversations, some of these female study participants gave the impression that they have achieved less by working as music teachers than their fellow students and colleagues who pursued careers as orchestral musicians or soloists. These statements point to the equation of the term ‘musician’ with performer (Bennett, 2008) as well as the association of music education with femininity and the related understanding of teaching, especially of

children and young people, as an ‘enabling role’ (Green, 1997). Inge, like some others, therefore emphasised the pleasurable absorption associated with teaching:

Teaching is not a boring job where you find the same situation over and over again. It’s very varied and I can develop myself because some [of my students] are very young, and some are in their mid or late twenties, and it’s wonderful to see how they learn in the lessons and make progress on their instruments.

Similar to musicians who create a sensual and aesthetic dialogue with the audience, Inge connects with music students of different ages to engage in moments of pleasurable absorption that are fulfilling and disrupt the entrepreneurial logic of self-interest.

In addition to teaching activities, some female study participants initiated their own music projects embedded in the local ‘DIY music industry’ (Bennett and Peterson, 2004), which is made up of small collectives and subcultural entrepreneurs and provides the resources and networks for participatory music making. Alice told us about the collective working structures of the cultural association she founded, which consists of 25 singers who perform operettas and children’s operas at various small venues in Vienna:

We choose the works together and discuss the interpretation until we come to a consensus because we see ourselves as a collective. And we divide the work – everyone takes on a part – and we pay ourselves for the work if it’s possible. That’s our perspective for the future because we don’t depend on theatres that pay badly and don’t renew the contracts of musicians when they complain about their working conditions. We have built our own structure and we’re becoming more and more professional because we’re investing a lot of time and energy in our collaborative work.

Alice sees the cultural initiative she founded as a counter-model to traditional music theatres because the DIY project is based on a collaborative division of labour, mutual support and ‘care for collegiality’ (Alacovska and Bissonnette, 2021) and offers more just and fair working conditions, which, in turn, open up a perspective for an alternative economic future. Banks (2007) has argued that an affective attachment to place can inspire cultural workers to more explicit social and ethical behaviour and cultural workers can contribute to social development of local communities. This affective attachment to place is expressed in the following narrative from Valeria who founded a music festival in her hometown in Spain:

I wanted to do something in this region because there was nothing, no music school, no music festival, nothing. And because I’m always there in the summer, I started to make music with a small group of children. And the word has spread, and the festival and the workshop programme have grown in the last few years, and last year (...) more than 200 people took part, from children to old people, and sometimes more than 400 people came to the concerts. And the festival is now very important for the local community.

When we asked Valeria about the organisation of the festival, she explained that her own honorarium and the fees for the workers and musicians are modest and that many people volunteer during the festival. This collective work has created a new form of community in a rural region in Spain that contradicts the self-centred models of entrepreneurship because it is rooted in an emancipatory DIY practice and ‘care for the local community’ (Alacovska and Bissonnette, 2021), which involves looking after the wellbeing and flourishing of fellow citizens.

Conclusion

This article has provided insights into the DIY careers of young classically trained musicians in Austria at the time of their transition from higher music education to work. Drawing on neo-Foucauldian

governmentality theory, we showed how musicians create entrepreneurial identities and subjectivities by investing work in themselves at different levels, from practicing their instrument on a daily basis and forms of self-optimisation in preparation for music competitions and auditions for positions with orchestras to forging distinct and coherent artistic identities and work on their emotions and feelings to manage their precarious, insecure and unstable working lives. These findings correspond with studies that propose an understanding of creative labour as ‘individualised labour’, invested in the creation of aesthetic and symbolic-expressive goods (Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009), and that emphasise young people’s demands for ‘passionate labour’ (McRobbie, 2016). However, our analysis has also pointed to the musicians’ practices that disrupt the competitive logic of entrepreneurialism. These breaks include moments and situations of ‘pleasurable absorption’ (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011) associated not only with music making but also with teaching, as well as alternative cultural practices that differ from experiences of pleasurable absorption in that they are rooted in a sociality that is held together by values of collegiality, solidarity and care for each other. Consequently, we have shown that creative labour cannot be understood solely as individualised, self-expressive and passionate work, but should also be considered as a collective cultural practice that forms an important part of the musicians’ everyday working relationships and that is embedded in broader communities of music practitioners and local music scenes. These alternative cultural practices have only recently been studied empirically to demonstrate the multiple ways in which creative workers make a living under precarious conditions (e.g. Banks, 2007; Alacovska, 2022). However, the DIY ethos is relevant to both individualised and collective cultural work: It is adopted to neoliberal rationality by young classically trained musicians, while at the same time it is fundamental for initiating, organising and managing small music projects, festivals and cultural initiatives that contribute to the shaping of alternative economies. In discussing these entrepreneurial and alternative cultural practices, it became clear that women face different challenges entering the classical music labour market than their male peers and need to find ways to overcome the contradictory expectations surrounding competition. While some women have turned competition inwards, rather than competing openly with others, and cultivated an entrepreneurial ethos or abandoned their careers as performers in favour of permanent employment at music schools, others have oriented themselves towards practices of commoning and an emancipatory DIY practice to initiate their own DIY music projects. The vast majority of the male study participants, however, focused on developing their careers as soloists or orchestral musicians. By analysing these gender-specific approaches, we hope that this study further contributes to the discussions about gender inequalities and DIY practices in the classical music profession.

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