

Towards Community Engagement in Music Curricula

Students' Perspectives on the Master's Programme

Contemporary Arts Practice (CAP)

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Introduction

Conservatories emerged in the late 18th and early 19th centuries (Bennett 2016, 59) as places where young individuals are educated for a career in classical music under the auspices of the highest artistic excellence. Traditionally, the main focus has been on developing mastery on the instrument through one-to-one tuition (Bennet 2016; Gaunt 2008), primarily aiming to gain an orchestra position (Hager and Johnsson 2008, 103–18; Bishop and Tröndle 2017; Bishop 2018). However, comprehensive societal changes, especially since the latter third of the 20th century, present new challenges to the classical concert life and the education of musicians in higher music education institutions (HMEIs) (Gaupp 2023): Societal structures in countries of the Global North are becoming significantly more diverse due to demographic shifts and (forced) migration (Vertovec 2007, 1024), leading to a multitude of different life paths and cultural forms of appropriation and expression. Especially in the wake of social movements such as #metoo and Black Lives Matter, issues of social inclusion and exclusion, as well as anti-discrimination and diversity, are increasingly coming into focus in the cultural sector, including HMEIs (Gaunt et al. 2021; Westerlund and Gaunt 2022; Petri-Preis 2023; Tolmie 2020). Given the exacerbation of social inequalities and global crises, aspiring and already established musicians are also increasingly called upon to “bring people together, enhance communal well-being, and contribute substantially to human thriving” (Elliott, Silverman, and Bowman 2016, 7) and “to put their arts to work’ for the positive transformation of their own and others’ lives” (ibid., 89). To some extent, HMEIs have already responded to these developments over the past decades with curricular adjustments (Chaker and Petri-Preis in this volume). Dawn Bennett observes that, especially since the 1960s, there has been an increasing openness towards

traditional and popular musics, an expansion of academic disciplines, and an integration of ideas from community music into teaching (Bennett 2016, 62f.). Helena Gaunt and colleagues demonstrate changes in instrumental curricula over the last 30 years in areas such as cultural entrepreneurship, decolonisation of the canon, intercultural cooperation, digital technologies, and audience development (Gaunt et al. 2021, 2).

Despite these incremental changes, musicians are confronted with developments and innovations in concert life (Chaker and Petri-Preis 2022) for which they typically do not receive appropriate training during their studies (Petri-Preis 2022; Pitts, Burland and Spurgin 2024). These include projects and formats in unusual locations (Peters et al. 2022; Haferkorn 2018), in social contexts, such as detention centres (Bánffy-Hall, Eberhard, and Ziegenmeyer 2021) or health-care institutions (Wit and Sevendik 2024; Smilde 2022), as well as in various community settings (Higgins 2012). Thus there is an urgent need for HMEIs to drive comprehensive curricular developments forward in response to societal changes and the altered expectations of the education of musicians. The crucial challenge is not merely to be passengers carried along by these developments, but to proactively shape institutional transformation, preparing students for a changing concert life and simultaneously contributing to a more solidarity-based and just society. As Catherine Grant emphasises: “[A] socially engaged tertiary education improves learning outcomes for students, with concomitant benefits for universities and society at large.” (Grant 2019, 388)

Research Interest and Research Questions

With the academic year 2023/24, a new artistic-academic master’s programme¹ started at the mdw – University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna, one which, in many respects, responds innovatively to the outlined societal changes and associated challenges in the field of educating musicians, and thus enters uncharted curricular territory.² The aim of the programme is to provide a “contemporary, well-founded artistic qualification for artists, enabling them to act competently, innovatively, and professionally in a changing professional field at the beginning of the 21st century. This qualification includes engaging with artistic expressions, techniques, and processes, finding one’s own artistic voice,

1 The author of this text was involved in the conception of the study programme and currently teaches there as well.

2 For a comprehensive discussion of the master’s programme, see Petri-Preis (2024).

collaborative work methods, the scholarly foundation of artistic practice, insights into socio-economic or socio-political structures of cultural landscapes, as well as organisational and (self-)management skills.” (mdw 2021, 5)³ All students with a BA degree are admitted, regardless of whether it is in music or in any other discipline. This aims to include students with informally acquired musical knowledge and skills in the programme, thus fostering a diverse student cohort.

Students have the opportunity to specialise in one of four study profiles: elemental music-making, music mediation/community music, improviser*composer-performer, and transmedial performance. While individual courses are specifically assigned to a study profile, joint cross-profile courses are intended to allow students to engage in dialogue with each other.

At the heart of the MA *Contemporary Arts Practice* (CAP) are three central thematic pillars located at the intersections of the study profiles and addressed in all courses: improvisation/composing-performing, community engagement and cross-arts.⁴ The first pillar refers to the expanding professional field of musicians, who are no longer solely performers, but also engage in composing, arranging, and improvising. Improvisation as an artistic practice is central to the curriculum because it opens up possibilities for musical exploration beyond set scores, occurs as a collaborative practice in mutual exchange with other players, and encompasses a positive failure culture. Moreover, it is “a unique channel for making meaning and connecting people” (Gaunt et al. 2021, 10; see also Smilde 2009, and Wit and Sevendik 2024), thus also relating to the thematic field of community engagement, which forms the second pillar and is the central focus of this article. On the backdrop of comprehensive societal transformation processes and global crises this topic has recently increased in importance in the education of musicians. Helena Gaunt and Heidi Westerlund argue that aspiring musicians must be given the opportunity to develop an identity as change agents and to have a societal impact (2022, 13). Catherine Grant and Samantha Low-Choy (2021) argue that socially engaged curriculum initiatives can, at best, foster social awareness, social consciousness and social imagination in students, enabling them to possess knowledge about societal connections, sharpen their awareness that there is more than one valid way to see the world, and develop their capacity to envision a better society through their art. The third pillar refers to the fundamentally inter- and transdisciplinary nature of the programme, which also includes other art forms (visual

3 Translated by the author.

4 For the whole curriculum see: <https://www.mdw.ac.at/studienplaene/?stNR=33970&stArt=cur> (accessed April 14, 2025).

arts, dance, etc.) and music traditions beyond classical art music, thus serving as a basis for community engagement in the sense of a broad understanding of music and culture.

Against this background, the aim of this chapter is to better understand students' perspectives on the MA CAP and to learn about their understanding of community engagement. I will present findings from an interview study with students from the first cohort of the programme, based on the following research questions:

- What are the students' expectations upon entering the MA CAP?
- What significant experiences have they had in the programme so far?
- How do they define community engagement, and what does this concept mean for them as musicians?

Methodological Approach

For this article, I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight of the 16 students between December 19, 2023, and February 14, 2024 – i.e. in the final third of the first of four semesters of the CAP master's programme. Four interviewees are enrolled in the music mediation/community music study profile, which places a special focus on community engagement, three are in the study profile of transmedial performance, and one student is in that of improviser*composer-performer. The sample was determined by the students' availability and willingness to participate in an interview; invitations to an interview were extended to all students. The following table provides an overview of the interviewees⁵:

5 The names of the students were pseudonymized, with the initial letter of the pseudonyms derived from the sequence of the interviews. The interviewees were extensively informed about the background to the study and my approach as a researcher, and explicitly consented to the use and publication of the data from the interviews. Four of the students had attended a seminar with the author at the time of the interviews.

Name	Gender	Study Profile
Alina	female	music mediation / community music
Beata	female	music mediation / community music
Christian	male	music mediation / community music
Dario	male	music mediation / community music
Elvira	female	transmedial performance
Frida	female	transmedial performance
Gerda	female	transmedial performance
Hemma	female	improviser*composer-performer

Table 1: Overview of the study sample. Source: Own illustration.

The interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted between 20 and 60 minutes. Except for the interview with Beata, which was conducted in English at her request, all the others were conducted in German⁶. They were fully transcribed, coded, and inductively analysed using thematic analysis by Ulrike Froschauer and Manfred Lueger (2020). This method involves an interpretative analysis of themes and their connections in discursive data. The aim of the procedure is to develop an understanding of “the variety of themes that emerge in the conversation material, their situational expressions, their modes of representation and connection, as well as the underlying perspectives” (Froschauer and Lueger 2020, 183).

Musical Socialisation and Evolving Artistic Self-Image

Making Things a Bit Different – New Forms of Presentation

Many of the interviewed students describe how their early family environment, while not specifically affiliated with so-called ‘high culture’, nonetheless strongly supported their musical ambitions. Alina, for example, explains that her parents, despite having no professional music background, always encouraged her pursuit of music. A formative experience for her artistic development was realizing that her mother often found concerts boring. This led to an early aspiration “to play in a way that is interesting for others, my

6 Direct quotes have been translated by the author.

mum, but also for many other listeners” (Alina, Pos. 4). Elvira mentions coming from a rural background, where her parents had little exposure to art, yet they always supported and encouraged her early desire to become a musician. Similar to Alina, she describes from this biographical experience an early urge to make her music accessible to a broad audience beyond traditional classical concertgoers. Beata and Hemma mention the crucial importance of their circle of friends for the development of their artistic self-image, a circle that lacked any special musical or ‘high-cultural’ affinity. Hemma reflects: “I played hockey and had many friends whom I saw five times a week. And then in the evenings, I always went to a concert or to the opera or somewhere else, and they didn’t.” (Hemma, Pos. 26) She always wondered how concerts could be designed in a way that they would also appeal to her friends. Beata retrospectively attributes central importance to her circle of friends for her further artistic development: “I was totally into other things from the beginning with my friends, who were not at all for music, which was important for me.” (Beata, Pos. 4) For her, the significance arises from feeling at home in several social worlds that she wants to connect through her music.

It becomes apparent that all interviewed students, already as adolescents felt the desire, as Frida puts it, “to do something a bit different” (Frida, Pos. 2) compared to conventional performance practices. This was due to profound experiences with significant figures from their childhood and youth, such as parents or friends, who were not culturally socialised in so-called ‘high-culture’ and thus had differing expectations for a concert.

A Small Democracy – Collective Music Making

All interview partners describe collective music-making in mostly self-founded ensembles as a formative experience in their musical socialisation. The ensembles were “artistic laboratories” (Smilde 2009; see also Petri-Preis 2022), where they could experiment with new performance practices, and represent safe spaces where they could work together in an atmosphere of mutual trust. Above all, what they value in collective music-making is the necessity of negotiation processes, as Alina notes: “I think it’s a good example of a small democracy. So, you learn that you have to bring your part, and the others have to bring theirs too. And then you can look together at what emerges.” (Alina, Pos. 12)

Orchestra or Teaching? – Perceptions of Deficiency in Instrumental Studies

The orientation of instrumental studies was perceived by the interviewees as strongly focused on mastering the instrument, which is not solely regarded negatively. For example, Alina says: “I felt that in my studies, there was a lot about craftspersonship, which is also good.” (Alina, Pos. 19) Beata also emphasises the importance of having the appropriate technical skills on the instrument: “I am someone who spends time on details of music, of specialisation with the instrument, of spending two hours with one sound. I mean of being completely into that, which is very important.” (Beata, Pos. 12) However, some students felt a lack of a specifically artistic dimension in their studies, which goes beyond mastering the instrument. Alina, for instance, shares that she dismissed the artistic value within herself, feeling that it remained unchallenged due to the heavy emphasis on the instrument. She primarily felt like a craftsperson, not as a musician or even an artist. Some students criticise that in their instrumental study, apart from aspiring for an orchestral position or teaching, no further perspectives were offered. Alina says: “Then the question always arises: What do you want to become? Do you want to join an orchestra, or do you want to teach? [...] And this question has always seemed absurd to me because I actually studied because I enjoy making music in all its forms.” (Alina, Pos. 10) Beata particularly missed the perspective on her role as a “musician actually in society” (Beata, Pos. 12), the reflection on the societal relevance of her art. Many students found freedom away from strict classical training, in folk music, where the focus is less on perfection and more on collective music-making, and in contemporary music, which allows for an interdisciplinary approach.

Expectations for the MA CAP

The interview partners formulate two main expectations for the MA CAP, which are – as I will show – very much impacted by the experiences they made in their previous instrumental studies.

Looking Left and Right – Artistic Development Beyond the Instrument

Not surprisingly, the interviewed students describe their own artistic development as a central expectation for the programme. However, in contrast to

their experiences in instrumental studies, they do not mean a “full focus on a main artistic subject” (Gerda, Pos. 4), but rather an expansion of their horizons in terms of interdisciplinary musical practices and their role and responsibility as musicians in society. Compared to instrumental studies, they expect from the CAP Master programme above all openness to be able to develop freely and to search for their own artistic language. Elvira describes it like this: “I came from classical instrumental studies, which is very, very straightforward, and has very few lefts and rights.” (Elvira, Pos. 6) What she expects is “being able to open up and look left and right and being able to take a lot with me, also from other opinions, disciplines, and impressions.” (Elvira, Pos. 6) Many of the interviewed students describe that they want to find their own, unmistakable artistic voice during their studies. Hemma says that she always felt like she was sitting between two chairs in instrumental studies, because she did not want to clearly assign herself to classical music or jazz. Ironically, she says that she is now attending the MA CAP because “I didn’t fit anywhere else” (Hemma, Pos. 6), and Elvira hopes for “space and time to find my own musical path in a protected, supportive environment.” (Elvira, Pos. 4)

The Connection between Art and People – Community Engagement and Theoretical Foundation

A second important aspect that the students address is that of societal engagement. Alina vividly describes how she feels that, in the initial months of the new programme, she has transformed from being a craftsperson, as she was trained to be in instrumental studies, into a musician capable of developing a musical vision. Subsequently, she aims to become an artist who can also effect change and have a societal impact. Christian also anticipates further development in terms of societal effectiveness, as he seeks to deepen “the question of the connection between art and humanity” (Christian, Pos. 18). Finally, some students also expect a scholarly foundation and thus a strengthening of their competence to theoretically underpin and critically reflect on their own artistic actions.

Understanding of Community Engagement

One of the three central pillars of the MA CAP is community engagement, which is defined in the curriculum as “creating spaces and experimenting with inclusive practices for the negotiation and enhancement of cultural participation and inclusion.” In the discussions, I therefore also investigated what the students

actually understand by this term and what it means for them as musicians. I was able to reconstruct five central aspects, which I will describe subsequently, in no hierarchical order:

Intersectional Advocacy

All students emphasise that community engagement means stepping out of their own self-centred social world, their own bubble. They want their music to reach people with whom they would not otherwise come into contact in the classical music world. In this context, they also criticise classical concert life sharply, which they perceive as rigid in its conventions, elitist, and excluding large parts of the population. Sharing their art with the general population also means for them the necessity of confronting other life realities and social worlds. To do this, they deem it necessary to empathise with the dialogue group they work with, or always consider their audience when conceiving concerts. Alina finds a particularly vivid image for the imagined audience. In her narrative, her mother, who often gets bored at concerts, becomes the personified imaginary audience that the young musician keeps in mind when developing new formats. The students see themselves as “bridging agents” (Strauss 1978, 123), who have “knowledge of more than one social world” (Suczek and Fagerhaugh 1991, 160), which they have acquired through their multi-membership in various social worlds (Kubiak et al. 2015), including those not related to so-called ‘high culture’. They can thus develop what Anselm Strauss calls an “intersectional advocacy” (Strauss 1978, 123) that brings together people from different social worlds.

Communality

Another important aspect that the students mention is communality. Above all, they deem communal music-making by professional and non-professional musicians⁷ a significant aspect of community engagement which can especially be realised in community orchestras and choirs. Christian recounts that he led an orchestra for several years that included both professional musicians and amateurs. He particularly emphasises the joy with which the members of the orchestra made music together and says that he has benefited not only personally from this, but also professionally, in terms of his career as a musician. And Dario describes how he rediscovered his own joy in making music in an amateur orchestra after a crisis-ridden education at the conservatory.

7 For this distinction see Matarasso (2019).

Activism

Some students also describe activism as an integral aspect of community engagement. To them it is not only about reflecting on inequalities and societal problems but actively counteracting them. Central issues such as migration or climate change should be addressed and dealt with in their own projects in order to make an active contribution to the well-being of society. At one point during the interview, Hemma rather casts doubt on the effectiveness of musicians: “Well, I often feel like I can’t really help society all that much. I can play the flute, which is great. If there is something we can change or something we can say, we should do it.” (Hemma, Pos. 36) She is convinced that “community engagement [...] simply means that we try to contribute to societal issues and present or find solutions.” (Hemma, Pos. 34)

Social Responsibility

Many of the interviewed students describe a feeling that, as musicians, they bear a social responsibility. Christian, for example, says that he sees his art as “a service to society or to my community” (Christian, Pos. 8). Hemma describes that artists, as public figures, have a special social responsibility and role-model effect: “I definitely believe that art can influence societal aspects. And I also believe that artists influence people.” (Hemma, Pos. 22) She thinks that a critical stance towards power is therefore also particularly important, in order to reflect on one’s own positioning and the existing hierarchies (see also Mörsch 2012). This critical reflexivity is part of a specific attitude that the students consider important in connection with community engagement.

Attitude

Reflexivity was already mentioned in the last section and from the students’ point of view it is particularly important with regard to a critical perspective on power. Socially engaged musicians should be aware of their own positioning and align their actions accordingly. Hemma expresses this somewhat pointedly: “So everything that I present on stage, someone can hear, which can impact them and lead them to carry it outward. That’s why I think it’s important to carefully consider what one puts out there.” (Hemma, Pos. 22) Alina describes how she sometimes fears falling into a missionary mode of community engagement. For that reason, a specifically educational approach is important to her, so as to create learning opportunities and open up spaces for experiences, yet without intending to instruct or patronise others. All respondents mention an

appreciation of heterogeneity and difference as an essential aspect of community engagement, as well as a welcoming attitude towards all people. For Frida, the overarching goal of community engagement is ultimately to strive towards “a beautiful society with open hearts and open minds” (Frida, Pos. 18).

Experiences of the MA CAP

At the time of the interviews the students were in their first semester of the MA CAP and talk about some experiences they find meaningful. They specifically highlight four main aspects: cross-curricular learning opportunities, open teaching and learning methods, community building during the orientation week, and the student cohort as a “community of practice” (Wenger 1998).

Cross-Curricular Learning

Cross-curricular learning opportunities arise from the structure of the curriculum. While students are assigned to one of four study profiles which they already apply for in their entrance exams, they also have numerous classes together with students from other profiles. Furthermore, certain classes from one profile can be taken as elective courses in other profiles, and the central artistic subject, taught in group sessions, is hosted each semester by a different profile. The students describe these overlaps as highly beneficial and stimulating for their artistic development.

Open Teaching and Learning Culture

The students describe encountering a specific learning culture in the classes, characterised by open teaching and learning methods. They are encouraged by their teachers to engage in reflection, discussion, and independent work. They see this as positive, especially considering the highly directive nature of instrumental studies, as it creates space for exchange and conversation. At the same time, they find this learning style challenging, because it requires a lot of self-initiative. Additionally, students perceive that there is no particular hierarchy between teachers and students, which they see as a stark difference from instrumental studies, especially individual lessons.

Community Building during Orientation Week

The students also emphasise the value of the orientation week that takes place at the beginning of the first semester. During this week, which is spent at a place outside the university, students have opportunities for collaborative artistic work through small projects and design tasks. In addition, they have the chance to perform and present in various social contexts. They can come together as a group and especially find themselves as a community of practice. Etienne Wenger defines this as a community in which people learn from and with one another in relation to a shared practice, and emphasises that “learning as belonging” (Wenger 1998, 5) is essential for learning processes.

Student Cohort as a Community of Practice

The success of this endeavour is evident, since all students speak highly of their student cohort as an immensely valuable resource. Many express astonishment at how valuable their fellow students have become to them in such a short period. Particularly compared to what they view as a highly individualistic instrumental study, they appreciate the mutual support and the diversity of backgrounds among their peers⁸, since this also fosters new ideas. Elvira notes that she lacked like-minded individuals in her instrumental studies, but has now found some. The group is simultaneously perceived as a place of empowerment and a safe space for experimentation and debate.

Conclusion and Outlook

Against the backdrop of comprehensive societal transformation processes and their influence on the education of musicians, my article provides insights into the MA programme *Contemporary Arts Practice* at the mdw – University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna. The focus is on the perspectives of students from the first cohort, providing insights into their expectations for and experiences in the programme, as well as their understanding of community engagement, one of the three central pillars of the programme. It is particularly notable that students generally describe their expectations and experiences in

8 Since an artistic BA is not a prerequisite for the MA CAP, students come from a wide variety of artistic disciplines (such as music, dance, performance) and genres (including classical music, pop, traditional music), resulting in a significant musical and cultural diversity within the cohort, although not necessarily a social or ethnic diversity.

comparison to instrumental studies. They consistently perceive instrumental studies as focused on technical excellence, aiming at obtaining an orchestral position, and also as being individualistic and competitive for the students and highly directed by teachers. Therefore, they expect the MA CAP to offer them the opportunity to develop artistically beyond their instrument and to work in an interdisciplinary way. This is especially meaningful, since they are able to acquire social, educational, and artistic skills that are otherwise usually acquired outside the HMEIs (Bishop and Tröndle 2017). Interviews highlight the experience that the students formed a community of practice within the cohort. The heterogeneity of the group is seen as a valuable resource for learning from and with one another in a trusting environment. Some students explicitly include the teachers in this community of practice, which reflects the non-hierarchical teaching and learning culture. The wide and nuanced understanding of community engagement described by the students is especially noteworthy. It encompasses aspects such as intersectional advocacy, communality, activism, social responsibility, and a specific critical and reflective attitude, thus showing overlaps with existing definitions in relevant literature (e.g. Borwick 2012; Smilde 2018; Stibi 2023) and related concepts such as “artistic citizenship” (Elliot, Silverman, and Bowman 2016) or “community music” (Higgins 2012).

While the insights from interviews with students from the first cohort of the MA CAP are not representative and therefore not generalisable, they do provide further argumentation for granting community engagement a more prominent role in higher music education (see also Smilde 2018). It is long overdue for HMEIs to ask “what (and who) a conservatoire education is for, what sorts of new subjects it might cover, and why its ongoing relevance might be important not just for musicians but for all of us.” (Tregear et al. 2016, 278) Programmes such as the MA CAP are a valuable and crucial contribution towards a stronger focus on community engagement and societal responsibility in music curricula. However, in order for HMEIs, their teachers and students to be able to address pressing societal issues, community engagement cannot remain in the margins located in specific programmes, but has to move to the centre of music curricula.

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