Evolving, Surviving, and Thriving: Working as a Chamber Musician in the 21st Century

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1. Introduction

The careers of some of the most successful chamber groups of the late 20th century can be traced through books and film. As a millennial musician and researcher, I find these rich and insightful accounts of the professional lives and working conditions of such groups—for example, the Lindsay Quartet (Gregor-Smith 2019), the Takacs Quartet (Dusinberre 2016) and the Guarneri Quartet (Blum 1986; Steinhardt 2000)—particularly fascinating. Many of the musical aspects of their accounts would be easily recognisable for many musicians: anecdotes about rehearsal banter and the clear passion that the musicians have for their repertoire are timeless. Meanwhile, descriptions of a wider industry with plentiful performance opportunities, stories of seemingly smooth entry to the profession, and an absence of anecdotes about grappling with technology of various forms for communication and self-promotion are much less easy to relate to in 2021. Of course, it could be that the authors have chosen to present the highlights of long and undoubtedly illustrious careers and simply opted to leave out a few of the hairier or more mundane details; however, given the widespread absence of such challenges in these accounts, it seems more reasonable to suggest that today's chamber musicians face different challenges to their predecessors.

1.1. A New Millennium: Challenges and Opportunities

The early 2000s brought great changes across the music industry with the rise of the internet and online technologies. The introduction of the smartphone, with its easy access to media-streaming platforms such as Spotify and YouTube, means that consumers' relationship with music is closer and more immediate than ever, and that musicians can reach potential audiences quickly. Through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube, musicians can create, curate and market their own content, communicate "directly" with their audiences without the mediation of third parties, and collaborate with others. This has presented exciting new opportunities for innovation and creative freedom, and has given musicians more control and autonomy over the production and promotion of their music than ever before (Haynes and Marshall 2018).

However, in order to take advantage of these evolving opportunities for access, reach, and communication, today's musicians must develop entrepreneurial and digital literacy skill sets that are far removed from the music-specific skills that they and their predecessors honed over many years of musical training. These are skills that might previously have been the sole remit of music managers, agents, and record labels, but for today's freelance musicians, and particularly chamber musicians, who must manage the business aspects of their careers, they have become increasingly important to establishing and building successful performing careers (Thomson 2013). The advancement and availability of technology, in combination with the emphasis placed upon these business and technology skills, have begun to change what is required of musicians, as well as the way musicians see themselves. They are not only artists; they are entrepreneurs working in an increasingly competitive environment (Parker et al. 2019).

A key contributor to the competitive environment faced by freelance musicians in the UK in the new millennium is a severe lack of funding for the arts in comparison to the preceding decades. In the second half of the 20th century, the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) was responsible for distributing substantial public funding to arts organisations across the UK. In the late 1980s, under Thatcher's government, the ACGB's funding was cut, with its chairman indicating that the shortfall should be made up by the private sector and wealthy donors (Palumbo 1990). Later came the 2008 financial crash, and governmental budgets for arts and culture across the UK were squeezed; all four regional arts councils have experienced substantial cuts across the last decade (Gottlieb 2013; Dempsey 2016). Subsequently, the notion that arts organisations should fundraise rather than be subsidised by the public has become further ingrained and has since shaped musicians' working lives. It remains to be seen precisely how the COVID-19 pandemic will affect arts funding and audience spending on the arts in the UK over the coming decade; however, at the time of writing, it seems likely that, for chamber musicians, indeed, all freelance musicians, there may be difficult times ahead.

The challenging economic outlook for the arts over the last decade has negatively impacted freelance musicians' working conditions. Various researchers have reported musicians' experiences of precarity within their freelance careers (Umney and Kretsos 2015; Vaag et al. 2014). Since funding is less plentiful now, there is heightened competition for fewer opportunities; meanwhile, contracts are unregulated, leaving musicians open to exploitation and lower rates of pay (Portman-Smith and Harwood 2015). It seems likely that chamber musicians are particularly exposed to these risks, as they tend to be responsible for sourcing their own performance opportunities and negotiating their own fees. The socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus both the precarity of freelance musicians' work and the direct influence of government policy and

funding on their working lives, as the need for physical distancing for audiences and performers has seen months of work for freelance musicians disappear almost overnight.

The culture of competition places pressure on musicians to become savvy entrepreneurs as well as expert artists, and encourages them to develop diverse skill sets and portfolios of work (Bartleet et al. 2012). Musicians are expected to be flexible and able to balance depth and breadth of skill to work in a wide range of musical activities. Portfolio careers allow musicians to curate work in different areas across, and in some cases beyond, the music industry (Bartleet et al. 2012, 2019). The portfolio approach allows musicians to combat potentially precarious working conditions by achieving a balance between "higher risk" options—such as freelance performance work—and "lower risk" options—such as arts administration or education—that tend to be more financially stable (Bennett 2010). Unlike their 20th-century counterparts, chamber musicians of the new millennium may be more likely to adopt portfolio careers as a consequence of today's more challenging economic landscape. For many chamber musicians, aside from financial stability, this diversification perhaps presents an opportunity for musical stimulation too. Musicians have reported that the variety within their portfolios is refreshing and that one area may strengthen another—with teaching informing performance and vice versa being one example (Haldane 2018).

To acquire the versatility needed to build a diverse and sustainable portfolio of work, higher music education curricula must provide students with opportunities to explore different areas of musical activity (Blackstone 2019). In addition to developing versatility and agility within music, graduates need practical business acumen that encompasses not only the various networking, digital literacy, and marketing skills indicated earlier, but also the realities of setting up and managing a business (Bennett 2016). These skills are likely to be particularly important for graduates who wish to make chamber music a substantial part of their portfolio of work, and who are therefore likely to have immediate responsibility for marketing their group and securing performance opportunities; however, research has yet to seek to understand chamber musicians' experiences of establishing and maintaining successful careers in the 21st century.

1.2. Chamber Musicians' Careers in the 21st Century

Existing research into chamber musicians' careers has offered insights into both musical and social aspects of these musicians' work together (e.g., Blum 1986; Murnighan and Conlon 1991). However, as well as their tendency to focus solely on the experiences of string quartet musicians, these earlier studies document the experiences of chamber musicians of the late 20th century. As explored here, the new millennium has brought, and continues to bring, many new

challenges and opportunities for the music industry. The challenges faced by today's chamber musicians, both new and established, are many, and it is no mean feat to forge a successful performing career, as recent studies into the wellbeing of professional musicians have highlighted (e.g., Dobson 2011; Scharff 2015; Gross and Musgrave 2016).

Research has begun to explore the skills needed by freelance musicians more generally to succeed in the music industry of the 21st century; however, it has yet to consider chamber musicians specifically. Chamber musicians are likely to have experienced the arts funding cuts of the last decade directly, since many of their performance opportunities are tied to venues that have previously been subsidised by arts council funding. Unlike larger western art music ensembles such as choirs and orchestras, most chamber ensembles, and certainly those embarking on the early stages of their careers, are now expected to take responsibility for their own promotion, networking, and audience engagement. Despite these numerous challenges, the chamber music scene in the UK remains busy and competitive.

It is, therefore, important that we understand more about the working conditions and career trajectories of chamber musicians in the 21st century. Through collecting and exploring rich data from the musicians themselves on their lived experiences, we can better identify and understand the challenges that they face and the implications that these may have for equality, diversity, and inclusion within the profession. Consequently, there would also be practical applications for the development of inclusive higher music education curricula that focus on graduate employability and long-term flourishing. Research may also provide evidence that enables chamber musicians to negotiate more effectively with policy makers and funding bodies. The present interview study sought to address the gap in our understanding about the realities of establishing, curating, and sustaining a career that centres on chamber music through the following research questions:

(1) What motivates chamber musicians?
(2) What are some of the challenges professional chamber musicians in the UK face?
(3) What skills have they developed to succeed?
(4) What are the implications for higher music education?

2. Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight UK-based professional musicians, for whom chamber music made up the majority of their portfolio of work. Seven of these musicians were from the UK and one was originally from South Africa. They were specialists in string, wind, piano, and voice (see Table 1 for details). In order to get a sense of the changes to the profession over the last few decades, three of the participants were recruited from performers who had entered the profession in the decades before 2000; the remaining participants had begun their professional

work in the first two decades of the 21st century. All but one of the participants had undertaken formal training in performance at a higher education institution, i.e., a university music department or a conservatoire.

Table 1. Participants' demographic information.

#	Instrument	Gender	Entry to Profession
P5	Viola	M	1970s
P2	Violin	F	1980s
P7	Violin	F	1980s
P1	Viola	M	Early 2000s
P6	Piano	F	Late 2000s
P8	Clarinet	M	Late 2000s
P3	Voice	F	2010s
P4	Clarinet	M	2010s

Source: Table created by author.

Interviews lasted around 40 min and covered various topics, including: career trajectory; initial expectations; preparation for entering the profession; the challenges of establishing, curating, and maintaining work as a chamber musician; and the skills, knowledge, and experience needed to succeed. It should be noted that data collection took place in autumn 2019, shortly before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, in exploring the interview themes, the potential impact of the ongoing pandemic and its aftermath will be considered alongside future directions for research and practice. Data were transcribed, and then thematic analysis was undertaken in NVivo using an inductive approach modelled on grounded theory; the aim of the analysis was to describe the data and theorise the findings. Themes were developed by collapsing, combining, or extending initial codes. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Arts and Humanities Ethics Committee at the University of York.

3. Results and Discussion

Analysis of the interview data revealed themes in five broad areas: motivations, the changing landscape of the music industry, barriers to the profession, identity, and skills (see Table 2). Within each of these areas there were broad categories, and, in some cases, sub-categories, which are explored in the section that follows.

Table 2. Thematic framework.

Theme	Categories	Sub-Categories
Motivations	Music Collaboration Ownership	
Changing landscape	Arts economy Perceived value of music	
Barriers	Money Gatekeeping Encounters	Role modelsRealities
Identity	Specialisation Diversification	
Skills	Music Entrepreneurship Social Self-awareness Resilience	Interaction Networking

Source: Table created by author.

3.1. What Motivates Chamber Musicians?

3.1.1. Music at the Core of It All

All of the musicians interviewed agreed that the musical experience itself was their main motivation for building a portfolio of work around chamber music performance and spoke of their endless fascination with the music:

> The string quartet repertoire: nothing can begin to compare really. Violinists and cellists of course have got options like piano trios, and a much bigger repertoire of duos. I think for a viola player, quartets are the greatest thing you can aspire to. Then there's the fact that it's the private voice of the great composers, so it tends to be more personal, more intimate and, as we know, some of their greatest music. (Participant 5 (P5))

The importance of repertoire highlighted by these musicians is consistent with accounts given elsewhere by chamber musicians speaking of their motivations and experiences (e.g., Steinhardt 2000). As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the centrality of the musical experience itself seems to be one of the aspects of chamber musicians' professional experiences that has not changed in the new millennium.

The desire to share their music with audiences was another key motivation that remains unchanged in the 20th and the 21st centuries. As one of the musicians explained, performances are often highlights of their working life that outweigh the less exciting aspects:

> You don't love every moment of your practice. You don't love every moment of the concerts. Sometimes you get fed up with it, but for all of that come these just phenomenal highs when you play to however many people—appreciative people—and you're pleased with what you've done. It sounds really corny, but you look out and you think: "I'm really lucky to be doing this". (P8)

The potential contribution of performing experiences to ensemble musicians' ongoing motivations for performing noted here adds to the existing body of literature on this topic (e.g., Woody and MacPherson 2010; Waddington 2013).

3.1.2. Collaboration

Another key motivation for all of the musicians interviewed was the collaborative aspect of ensemble playing. All participants spoke of their passion for working with other artists to explore new ideas and new ways of working:

> I think what really makes me tick is the musical interaction and the spark and the responding and all of that that you get in a collaborative setup—whether that's two people or in a big group. So, for me, that's a big motivation behind a lot of things that I do. (P6)

This motivation was articulated by all of the musicians in this study, regardless of the stage of their career, as well as in the accounts of other chamber musicians elsewhere (Steinhardt 2000; Gregor-Smith 2019); consequently, this appears to be another aspect of chamber musicians' experiences that has not changed in the 21st century. A lot of music psychology research has been devoted to uncovering the social and musical dynamics of chamber groups precisely because the kind of interactions described and valued by this participant are at the core of what these musicians do (Keller 2014; Bishop 2018).

3.1.3. Ownership

Another motivation identified in the accounts of all of the interviewees concerned the creative control that chamber music affords them:

> That feeling I guess with all music but especially with quartets, of "it's only as good as what you bring into it", because you are very much responsible for it. You're not passive behind a conductor or anything. Just more in control. (P1)

Unlike larger ensembles such as choirs or orchestras, chamber music allows musicians the freedom to decide who they want to work with, what they want to play, where, and how. Of course, it is not necessarily straightforward to

draw together players who have a shared vision and approach to working together (Waddington 2017), but with the right combination of collaborators and circumstances, small-group musical collaboration can be rewarding, as this singer explained:

> I think when you get many of the salaried jobs that are within music, or regular jobs with a bigger company, you lose any creative choice making in terms of programming. If you sing for an opera company or play for an orchestra, you are one of many people and you are part of the process that somebody else is leading. [. . .] Having that ability to be involved in projects where you are able to be creative and with people who are equally adventurous and wanting to explore new things—I think that's what's really interesting for me. I enjoy the rehearsal process and the creating of it sometimes more than the actual performance of it. The performance is important, but actually I feel like the really interesting bit has already happened by the time the performance happens. (P3)

The greater creative flexibility offered by small ensemble work in comparison to larger-scale collaborative performance work was attractive to these musicians. Overall, a combination of creative ownership, inspiring collaborations, and overriding passion for the music motivated these musicians to place chamber music at the core of their working lives. It seems likely that all these features can be observed individually in solo and/or orchestral work as well, but perhaps it is their combination that is unique to chamber music making. These motivations for pursuing chamber music work were considered powerful enough to outweigh the various hardships, explored in the section that follows, faced by today's chamber musicians:

> The hidden fact is that you really would do it for free, but you do your best not to communicate that to anyone. [. . .] It's an idiotic professional choice to make basically. It doesn't add up. The amount of time that you have to put into rehearsing, learning the scores, practising, travelling to rehearsals—all of that stuff—and turning down paid work in order to spend that time rehearsing. You'd basically make a loss if you were to add it up! (P2)

This impassioned but rather sobering characterisation of chamber music as something of an impractical vocation was supported by other musicians' accounts, regardless of when they entered the profession, and highlights the strength of their motivations for making chamber music central to their working lives.

3.2. A Challenging Professional Landscape

Interviewing musicians who established their careers in the 20th century, as well as musicians who have entered the profession more recently, allowed the construction of a picture of how the profession has changed over time. Most striking were the changes to the arts economy in the UK that have had a direct impact on the way these musicians work, how much they earn, and their professional and musical identities.

3.2.1. The Arts Economy

The longer-established musicians described the arts landscape of the 1980s and 1990s as offering an abundance of well-remunerated performance opportunities for UK-based groups:

> Every month we had at least 15 concerts in music societies around the UK. We were playing on the BBC at least twice a month if not more. We were making records for which we were being paid very well. We were doing lots of touring abroad and around the UK as well. [. . .] If I approach now the same music societies that we played at then for the same fee—I mean the exact number that we played for then—they'll say that's far too much and they can't possibly afford it. [. . .] Out of those music societies that we used to play at, there's maybe three or four who are still operating at the same kind of level, but it used to be maybe 120. (P2)

Such frequent, reasonably prestigious performance opportunities are difficult to imagine when faced with today's competitive environment, where such opportunities are relatively scarce. Another musician explained:

> There were fewer groups around in those days. There were more music clubs and therefore more concerts available. The possibility of balancing freelance orchestral work with getting concerts as a chamber musician was probably easier to achieve, because it was all just that much more relaxed. [. . .] It was a smaller pool of players and a larger amount of work basically, so it was just altogether more possible. [. . .] Basically, there was less competition, you didn't have to be as good, and it was easier to find balance. So quite simply we were luckier. We were living in a very fortunate time. (P5)

This account, too, feels far removed from the realities of the bleaker professional landscape that today's musicians face. As outlined in the introduction to this chapter, many of the differences may be attributed to changes in arts funding across the UK. Reflecting on the reduction in the number and quality of performance opportunities in recent years, one of the interviewees offered this explanation:

> I think that various things have contributed to it. Obviously, the Arts Council's demise because a lot of music societies were dependent on that kind of Art Council funding which just evaporated over the years. But I think also some responsibility lies with [certain organisations], who have promoted the people on their roster so that music societies can actually get a concert for £200, because it's subsidised at the other end, and they see no reason why they should pay £2000 when they can get one for £200. I think that has actually led to a huge policy of undercutting. It's a big race to the bottom to see who can get concerts by lowering their fees to a degree that the music societies are then interested. (P2)

These comments are in line with the broader research on musicians' working conditions, which, in some respects, might be described as "exploitative" (Portman-Smith and Harwood 2015). Early-career chamber musicians seem likely to be more vulnerable to this kind of exploitation, since most must negotiate their own performance opportunities and fees and may feel pressure to do concerts for little pay or for exposure.

Some of the challenges in relation to securing performance work were highlighted in this study by the musicians who entered the profession post 2000. One of these musicians reflected on some of the difficulties she experienced in establishing herself during the second decade of the 21st century and explained that finding enough work in a saturated market was particularly difficult:

> I think getting paid performances is a challenge: where to look is quite difficult and then knowing who to talk to about that, and how to get someone even interested in booking you. If you do manage to speak to a promoter, like someone said to me: "We have 200 emails a day from groups just like yours and we can't look at everybody". It's quite difficult to know how to manage that. (P3)

This competitive environment forces musicians to develop a variety of skills and unique selling points in order to make themselves attractive to concert promoters and other bookers, further reinforcing the notion of musicians as entrepreneurs presented in existing research (Parker et al. 2019). For chamber musicians, particularly those in the early stages of their careers, who are unlikely to have agents and bear responsibility for securing their own performance work, this means that there is pressure to acquire effective enterprise skills as early as possible.

In further evidence of both the effects of funding cuts and the challenge of securing work, another of the interviewees noted that when music societies did wish to book their group for concerts, they were unable to offer them compensation for expenses like long-distance travel:

> You end up sometimes missing out on the work because the funding is so squeezed. Sometimes societies would love to book you; a really good example of this is many of the societies in Scotland—particularly in the north of Scotland. They'd like to book a greater variety of groups, but they just don't have the money to pay for the travel up there, so it's very hard for them to present a varied programme. That's a bit frustrating. (P4)

The musicians, then, face the choice between taking the work and making a loss in real terms after travel time and travel expenses are accounted for—the vocational but impractical experience described in the previous section by P2—or missing out on the work altogether.

3.2.2. The Perceived Relevance of Western Art Music

As well as changes to funding for the arts in the new millennium, there was a sense, particularly from the more established musicians, who had been around long enough to witness the changing landscape, that live chamber concerts were now valued less. One of the violinists was concerned that this would become a problem in years to come:

> It was always the case that you would see the average age of the music club or society audience is about 75, and then of course they die off and you just think, "well, who's going to come in next?", and then you'll see the next generation. As I get older, I'm not sure that next generation is an absolute given. My generation, yes they're still interested in music, but the next generation down and the generation after that: "music societies? Why do we need those anymore?" (P7)

This perception of aging audiences and decreasing interest in such concerts from the younger generations is also supported by research (Dearn and Pitts 2017) and paints a bleak picture for the future of chamber music in the UK.

Changes in education policy over the last decade are likely exacerbating this gap between generations with regard to interest in and understanding of chamber music. The UK government introduced the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) for schools in England in 2011—a collection of subjects that are considered to have the most educational value, and a performance indicator by which schools are measured. The EBacc does not include art subjects. In practice, this omission has resulted in a striking reduction in formal music education for children and young people, including instrumental learning (Bath et al. 2020). A recent report commissioned by the Incorporated Society of Musicians (Underhill 2020) has suggested that music education in schools has been further devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with almost 10% of primary and secondary schools in England no longer teaching music at all. One of the interviewees here opined that, as a consequence of these reductions

in music education, "fewer people are interested in going to concerts because fewer people know anything about what concerts are, or what music is, or have a personal connection to it" (P2).

Whilst the impact of the reduction in music learning may not be felt directly in terms of audience numbers at present, the general devaluing of western art music that has been cemented through education policy, in combination with the funding cuts over the last decade, has the potential to result in a lesser appreciation for western art music among future audiences. With chamber music itself arguably something of a niche within western art music, chamber musicians will have to work harder and more imaginatively to combat perceptions of elitism and irrelevance, and to grow their future audiences.

3.3. What Barriers to Inclusion Are There?

The participants were not asked directly about barriers to the profession during the interviews, but, during analysis, key barriers were identified that have important implications for equality, diversity, and inclusion in relation to the study of chamber music at various levels and for chamber musicians at different points in their careers.

3.3.1. Money

The barrier to the profession that came through most strongly in all of the interviews was money, and there were several different ways in which it was seen as a barrier. One interviewee who teaches in a UK conservatoire alongside their performing career noted that the rise in UK higher education tuition fees in 2012 changed students' attitudes towards study and work:

> It's a lot more expensive now than it was [when I was a student]. So even the first and second-year undergrads, they don't feel like they've got all the time in the world. They feel like they've got to succeed and the pressure of having to get good marks—and students have had that for the last century I'm sure but I feel like the pressure's on, because a lot of people are being slightly more realistic with them now, which maybe they weren't ages ago. (P1)

For prospective students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the high tuition fees, particularly for a degree in a subject that does not guarantee a steady source of income upon graduation, may be unaffordable or unjustifiable. Current students are keenly aware of how much they are investing in their training; they have higher expectations of their study experience and of themselves (Vigurs et al. 2018). They know that they must acquire and refine the skills necessary to earn a living when they graduate.

In relation to transitioning into the profession, several of the musicians spoke of the financial barriers that new graduates who are seeking to establish themselves as chamber musicians face:

> It takes quite a while to establish yourself doesn't it? [. . .] It's a gradual process. Initially you do a lot of things for free or for exposure or expenses. I worked a lot with, still do work a lot with, an Irish music promotion company. [. . .] When they were initially starting their company, I'd go over to Ireland a lot and do lots of playing for nothing more than my flights paid and a sofa to sleep on. You do these things to build the profile and build experience and contacts and all of these things. (P8)

As noted elsewhere in the literature on musicians' working conditions, there is something of an expectation that musicians who are starting should take on gigs for experience, little pay, or exposure (Portman-Smith and Harwood 2015). As such, this presents a barrier for musicians who do not have the financial security that would allow them to work for free or for very little pay. Some musicians in this position are fortunate to have financial support from their families; others, like one of the interviewees here, may have worked in a non-musical job to fund the first few months of insecurity. For other musicians, however, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, this barrier may be insurmountable.

This financial barrier around the transition into professional working life is potentially worse for string players who aspire to be chamber musicians. In addition to being open to exploitation as they establish their careers, these players must often also acquire suitable professional instruments:

> Some students come from families with money, so they can afford an instrument, while some students come from absolutely nothing and really need a violin. So, I will tell them that they need to do more free gigs where people choose what they play, because they can borrow an instrument and show off to fundraisers or sponsors. Whereas, for somebody who doesn't need an instrument I wouldn't think that that's a priority. (P1)

In the scenario described by this interviewee, students who do not have a suitable instrument upon graduation may be further disadvantaged. Not only must they find the money for an instrument, but, as they endeavour to do so, they may be forced to take on more performing work for free or without having much creative control or ownership. This reality further disadvantages musicians from less wealthy backgrounds both financially and musically, and may limit the direction that their careers can take in the earliest stages.

The financial challenges of sustaining a career that centres on chamber music were considered by two of the most experienced musicians interviewed. They

suggested that although it was possible to make a living primarily playing chamber music, it was not easy. As P5 explained: "If you've got a big mortgage to be able to support, all of those unpaid quartet rehearsals and things of that sort, those practical things can be the make or break factors". This lends further support to the notion of chamber music as a vocation that "doesn't add up" (P2) economically, and these financial barriers may restrict access to the profession to those from secure middle- and upper-class backgrounds.

3.3.2. Gatekeeping

One route into establishing a successful career as a young chamber ensemble that several of the interviewees described is through winning competitions or young artists' schemes. These tend to open doors to more prestigious engagements and opportunities. One of the musicians described this process briefly:

> It's so subjective what the public appetite and what the potential is for a group. It depends on the competition, it depends on who you're pitted against, it depends who's on the panel, it depends on what mood the musicians are in on the day, there are just so many variables. (P1)

It should be noted that, in the interviews, only three of the five musicians who entered the profession in the last two decades mentioned competition success as being instrumental in their own careers. Whilst success at competitions is not necessarily required to establish a career in chamber music, it certainly helps—a point that was acknowledged by almost all of the interviewees.

The adjudicators of competitions and young artists' schemes have a difficult task. They also hold a lot of power. Winning a competition can be a material boost for a chamber group. Awards often come with concert series or tours, as well as prize money and mentoring. Competition winners are an attractive prospect for concert promoters, and this can help groups to build networks of contacts and cement their reputations. In many ways, competition panels are gatekeepers to early success and opportunities for more stable income. Given the power they wield, it is important then that competition panels are diverse—both socially and musically—to prevent the same kind of groups playing the same kind of repertoire in the same ways from automatically being the most prominent voices within the profession, to the exclusion of others.

3.3.3. Encounters: Role Models and Realities

Some of the more recent graduates spoke of the influence that encountering established chamber musicians had in showing them that it was possible to earn a living as an ensemble musician. As one participant explained, until he encountered these musicians personally, he had not realised that this was a possibility:

> I didn't always know I wanted to be a chamber musician. I grew up in South Africa, so there's not a lot of quartets around to look up to and so I only really discovered what it was when I started studying. I knew what it was, but I didn't really know how to listen to them, or I'd never really seen more than one live in my life. [. . .] I started doing a little bit of freelance work with orchestras while I was at college and seeing what the kind of value of playing was, that there was potential to make money out of music, because I'd never really met anybody who had done it, or understood it first-hand. (P1)

This is an important barrier to inclusion. This participant attributed this lack of access to his geographical location; for others, opportunities to play chamber music and encounter chamber musicians may depend upon their access to performances or to instrumental learning. To aspire to a career in chamber music, a young musician must know that such a thing exists, so they must encounter chamber music and musicians. In addition to knowing it exists, they must also know that it is possible for them: they must be able to relate to the role models they encounter—to be able to visualise themselves in similar roles (Gorman 2017)—and also have opportunities to acquire the necessary skills, both musical and extra-musical.

Within higher music education, there is much that institutions can do to prepare their students for the realities of the profession. One of the musicians explained that despite her own careful planning for establishing a portfolio of work that centres on chamber music, she was not aware of these realities when she graduated:

> I thought that once you were getting relatively high-profile concerts at places, and once people were acknowledging that they were happy to book you and people were happy to pay you money to come and hear you in a concert, I thought that concerts would be financially viable and sustainable, and therefore that promoters would be happy to take you and agents would be happy to take you on; that within a couple of years of leaving college it would be relatively easy to get yourself a manager or some person who would take some of that administrative responsibility away from you. I now think you have to be very lucky to get into that situation, and many of the larger groups that you look at as a student are actually doing most of the stuff themselves. I wasn't aware of that at all. (P3)

It should also be noted that the most recent graduates interviewed here left their postgraduate programmes in the early 2010s, and the intervening years have seen higher education institutions devote more attention to careers and employability curricula for their students. However, it is useful to also consider the important role that instrumental and vocal teachers play in providing direct access to the profession as role models. There needs to be more consideration and transparency around how

success is portrayed so that students are able to make informed decisions as they visualise their futures and design their careers (Bennett and Bridgstock 2015).

3.4. Professional Identity

The musicians interviewed in this study all had established portfolio careers that placed chamber music at the centre of their working lives. All of them did some teaching—many of them as instrumental or chamber music tutors in higher education institutions. Some of them had additional work such as freelance orchestral work, or running chamber music courses or festivals. Most of them had a main ensemble that they worked with; some also had other ensembles they played with regularly. In talking about the decisions that they had made around the balance of work in their portfolios, a tension between diversification and specialisation became evident. One of the violists spoke of his time with a prominent quartet as a period of intense specialisation:

> During all those 20 years with the quartet, I did, I think, no other playing, apart from bits of solo playing locally. There was no time for any orchestral work in London. I think the strength of the quartet's lifestyle and the danger of it was that it was epic, so that when it went wrong, or when you stopped, I had no other contacts, no other experience going on. And after 20 years, I couldn't really go back to being a violinist. [. . .] The downside of always only doing the quartet, even though it means you don't have the problems of scheduling other work in and so forth, is that you are effectively cut off from the profession, and then to get back into it is a hell of a lot more difficult. (P5)

For this player, the advantage of being able to focus solely on the quartet was the total immersion in one thing that was artistically satisfying and all-consuming. He spoke of the unique lifestyle the quartet were able to forge through their imaginative programming and careful curation of opportunities that would likely not be possible for today's quartets in the UK, given the much bleaker arts economy. The danger in specialising, as articulated by this player, is that it has the potential to narrow the musician's skill-set and network. This narrow and deep approach could, at one point, have been advantageous for a chamber musician's career. For today's chamber musicians, however, the disadvantages seem to outweigh the advantages.

Another player also reflected on this tension between specialisation and diversification and how she perceives the focus has shifted over time:

> I did my undergrad 2002 to 2005 and then my postgrad 2007 to 2009, and it felt as though we were still being trained for the industry maybe as it was in the 90s, when there was much more funding available for things and possibly people didn't have to be quite so business-minded as they do now.

> I think the successful youngsters coming out of training now have really got a very astute sense of [. . .] the need for versatility; whereas, I think I was actually actively encouraged not to be versatile but to specialise. I think that's possibly more the old model and it's quite interesting for me that actually I am quite a versatile musician and I have gradually found my way back to that versatility. [. . .] But it does feel like a factor in the whole thing is the way that the industry has changed. (P6)

Beyond the practical, economic reasons for not pouring all of their skills and resources into a single project, and in line with existing research on performers' careers (Haldane 2018), other musicians suggested that building a diverse portfolio of work strengthened the overall quality of their music making.

> I think that you need to have space from each other in order to be able to bring other things into the mix; different life experiences, different musical experiences, they all feed into being a more rounded quartet player or chamber musician. I think that's really important. [. . .] It's important to have the other things too. I think it is possible to [play together] full time, but you might end up killing each other. (P7)

This emphasis on diversification seems to be more important in the 21st century than it was for chamber musicians of a few decades ago. With tougher working conditions and greater precarity in terms of employment opportunities, it is vital that today's players are versatile musicians with diverse networks of contacts and skills.

3.5. What Skills Do Today's Chamber Musicians Need?

Chamber musicians need a wide range of musical and extra-musical skills in order to establish and maintain successful careers.

3.5.1. Musical

All of the interviewees agreed that, above all else, chamber musicians had to be skilled in music performance:

> First and foremost, the performance side of things has to be good. You can't ever forget that what people are paying to hear is the music. (P4)

This player is speaking in terms of the quality of the musical product, but the interviewees agreed that it was as much about the creative process itself. As another player explained:

> You need to keep the music itself at the absolute core of everything that you do. Just the music: that should be the thing that occupies the biggest bit of your mind and your thinking. Let the rest of it take care of itself. (P2)

Of course, this music-centric perspective is in direct tension with the more pragmatic, business-minded perspective—"head vs. heart", as one participant (P6) described it. Another participant described the effect this tension has on his thought process when he programmes a concert:

> You've got to think: "Are people going to want to come to it?" (P8)

Ultimately, there was a general consensus that chamber musicians have to reconcile these two, often opposing, perspectives at some point to find a balance between artistic satisfaction and generating income. It seems likely that this challenge is not unique to chamber musicians; soloists, too, must think strategically as well as musically when they plan their own programmes. For chamber musicians, however, there is perhaps the added complication of the programme being agreed on by more than one musician.

3.5.2. Entrepreneurial

Business acumen has become increasingly important in the 21st century, as the profession has become more competitive. Some of the interviewees felt that the competitive environment has inspired some positive consequences in terms of innovation and creativity:

> Somehow now people have to be a bit more creative and imaginative about making things happen, which has its advantages. The fact that it forces people to be creative is a really good thing but I think it puts a lot of pressure on people to spend time on filling in funding applications and doing all of those other things rather than having the luxury of just practising their craft. (P6)

This account of the way that this business perspective underpins artistic work further underlines the characterisation of musicians as entrepreneurs. Another interviewee described some of the many such skills she employs to pull together a single performance:

> I feel like I have to split my brain so many different ways. I'm the promoter of a group, I do the marketing, I do the design of the concept of the concert, then I need to do the logistics on the day of the concert, and I need to perform. Performing often ends up feeling like it's the last thing that has to be done, and that feels a bit weird. All of these other things need to have happened for the performance to happen. In a way they're more important otherwise you'll never get to the performance, but actually I feel like the performance should be the most important bit but it gets pushed down the pile. (P3)

Since business skills like the ones listed in this participant's account have become essential to success as a chamber musician, higher education institutions must equip their music students with a range of these skills.

3.5.3. Social

An important facet of chamber musicians' work is working with other people. The social dynamics of small groups in any context can be intense, and in the context of collaborative performance, where there are artistic decisions to make and egos to bruise, these dynamics can be fragile indeed (Murnighan and Conlon 1991; King 2006):

> There are all sorts of interpersonal skills that come into play: diplomacy, tact, kindness, honesty, reliability, because for working in particularly a small-group situation you need to be a good colleague in all those general senses. [. . .] You have to learn as a musician what the difference is between criticising somebody else's musicianship and working together to find an idea of how something might go, and that actually it's not a question of right and wrong or superior and inferior; it's just working together to find an agreed endpoint. (P6)

These interpersonal skills seem to be as important today as they have been for decades, probably centuries.

As well as nurturing existing relationships with co-collaborators, the participants spoke of the importance of networking with other artists to generate new and exciting collaborations:

> You need to be good at networking with people—and not just phoning up people on a superficial level, it's like becoming friends with people with similar interests and then looking at how you can collaborate together, because I think that the most interesting partnerships come from genuine relationships with people. (P3)

Interpersonal skills extend beyond the inner workings of the group itself to how well the musicians can connect with audiences and organisers.

> You can't just walk on, play the programme, be very formal, say nothing, and walk off and expect the audience to have a wonderful time [. . .] I think most societies really appreciate a well-rounded evening's entertainment. They want to hear what you've got to say about music, and you're enhancing their enjoyment. (P4)

This point was made by the more recently established chamber musicians who were interviewed. This indicates that this skill may have become more important to today's audiences and, by extension, the promoters who arrange concerts.

Meanwhile, social media has become a new way of reaching audiences in the 21st century. This presents challenges and opportunities for chamber musicians. One of the more established musicians described some of the pitfalls of social media and self-promotion:

> We hate all of the social media, because we're all of a certain age. We weren't raised with that, with the expectation that you self-promote; that you post stuff the whole time. [. . .] This is the thing that I know is affecting youngsters now. They go on social media and they see that all their chums: "Why are they in Seville playing with that group? I thought I was being asked to play that and I'm not", and that brings huge questions about worth and inadequacy, and I think it's extremely dangerous this whole business of comparison. (P7)

There is an excellent point here around the effects of social media on musicians' mental health and wellbeing, given the expectation that they should engage with it to some extent professionally, if not personally. Nevertheless, networking and marketing via social media are important tools for the 21st century chamber musician.

3.5.4. Self-Awareness

All of the musicians interviewed spoke of the importance of developing a critical self-awareness as soon as possible around what they are good at, what they enjoy, and what they want to do. Speaking about his higher education teaching experiences, one of the interviewees explained:

> I guess what students are trying to do early on and what I'm trying to help them with is to figure out what they want to do and what they're good at doing and what they enjoy playing and all that stuff. (P1)

By cultivating these skills in self-reflection during their studies, musicians are then able to make more informed decisions about their working lives (López-Íñiguez and Bennett 2020). The capacity for reflection continues to be important for professional development. One player spoke of a gradual, hard-won awareness of what brought him the most joy musically:

> I was sat there cross-legged on the floor in the middle of the gamelan playing multiphonics and making these huge gongs resonate in the national concert hall and I just thought: "This is it. This is what I want to be doing. I need variety". (P8)

Various researchers have emphasised the importance of teaching students how to engage in self-reflection (e.g., Esslin-Peard 2017), and have come up with innovative ways of facilitating this process (Bennett 2013). Self-awareness through

reflection seems to be a vital skill for 21st-century chamber musicians throughout their careers as they make decisions on everything from who to collaborate with and the kinds of performance projects they find most rewarding, to more practical considerations around working patterns and travel commitments.

3.5.5. Resilience

The final skill that 21st-century chamber musicians need is resilience. To navigate their competitive professional environment, particularly in the early years of their careers, chamber musicians need to develop a thick skin and find ways of maintaining their motivation:

> You have to have great staying power and be very good at putting up with disappointments when you do auditions and you think you've played really well but you don't get anywhere, and when you meet this age-old conundrum that you don't get offered professional work until you've had experience of playing professionally. Little by little you get those few opportunities and you've got to be very persistent and keep finding ways to not get depressed, and basically have a life support system. (P5)

One way of fostering resilience may be through embedding self-reflection in music curricula. The relationship between resilience and self-reflection, whilst not yet empirically explored in relation to musicians, has begun to be explored among competitive athletes, with studies suggesting that self-reflection and self-insight may result in greater resilience (Cowden and Meyer-Weitz 2016).

4. Conclusions

The findings of the interviews reported in this chapter very much support the notion of chamber musicians as entrepreneurs in a competitive environment. This is not to say that they do not place the music at the centre of what they do—it was clear that the musical experience remains the primary motivation for 21st-century chamber musicians. It was also clear, however, that the new millennium has brought many challenges to establishing and sustaining a career in chamber music. The lack of well-paid and high-quality performance opportunities seems to be the main challenge and contributor to the competitive working environment. This, in combination with the devaluing of music within education, waning interest in classical concerts among younger audiences, and a perception of classical music as the preserve of the white and wealthy, has also exacerbated the pre-existing barriers for equality, diversity, and inclusion within the UK's classical music industry, and particularly for chamber musicians. Ultimately, breaking down these barriers will require systemic change from the ground up.

4.1. Removing Barriers: Inclusive Music Education

Today's chamber musicians, and those aspiring to become chamber musicians, face various barriers, particularly in the early stages of their careers, that discriminate against those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This further entrenches the bias towards white middle-class musicians that is inherent within classical music and that is established from the early stages of formal music education (Bull 2019). For the music industry to be truly inclusive, music education must first become inclusive. We must advocate for and invest in high-quality music education for all. There is promising work going on within music education to further this agenda, including how high-quality instrumental tuition can be extended to children living in remote areas (King et al. 2019), how we can improve the quality of music education provision for disabled children (Ockelford 2015), and how we can facilitate meaningful and pupil-centred music learning for children and young people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds (Kinsella et al. 2019). To facilitate musical inclusion, there must be investment both in music education and the arts. The exclusion of music from the EBacc in England has had detrimental effects on the perceived value of music, but it has also further widened the gap between pupils from less privileged backgrounds and their more privileged peers. The EBacc, as a performance indicator, has encouraged schools to focus on teaching the "core" subjects with optional, "less important" subjects, such as music, being side-lined. For some schools, often those with more pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, the mounting pressure to perform well on metrics like the EBacc seems likely to be reflected in the decreasing numbers of pupils sitting GCSE and A-Level music examinations (Whittaker et al. 2019; Bath et al. 2020). For the provision and uptake of music education to be improved and broadened, an important first step would be the inclusion of music and other arts subjects in the EBacc.

Ensuring high-quality music-learning opportunities for all, from the earliest stages of musical training through to higher music education, is vital in constructing an inclusive pipeline that leads directly to the profession. Tomorrow's chamber musicians will be the pupils who have opportunities to learn and continue learning instruments, and to encounter chamber musicians, chamber music, and performances.

4.2. Implications for Higher Music Education

At the time of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic has had, and continues to have, a profound effect on the working lives of all musicians. The pandemic has accelerated our use of technology to meet new challenges, and the importance of mastering the skills to utilise these technologies has been highlighted, as artists of all kinds stream live and pre-recorded events, and create and publish new content in response to the evolving situation. New skills have been developed, or existing skills have been

further refined, in relation to online technology for music recording, performance, teaching, and communication. As freelancers, chamber musicians have had to apply their creativity and resourcefulness to create new ways of generating income in the absence of live performances. As we enter a new period of social and economic uncertainty in the wake of the pandemic, musicians and recent music graduates in particular will face greater challenges than ever before.

Whilst higher education institutions cannot combat these new challenges directly within the profession, there is much that can be done to prepare music graduates to work as versatile musicians who are aware of the realities of the profession and will succeed despite the challenging and unpredictable environment they face. In addition to the various skills outlined in the findings here, it is more important than ever that higher education music curricula provide students with opportunities to develop depth of skill in one or more areas, but also interest and competence in others (Bennett 2007). In order to survive and thrive in today's music industry, chamber musicians must be able to be more than chamber musicians. Flexibility in professional identity as well as attitude, and competence in developing new skills, are becoming ever more important as the industry undergoes sudden and unprecedented changes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, as well as working hard to widen participation, higher music education must ensure that students encounter diverse and representative role models via instrumental tuition, master-classes and concerts, and that they are well-informed about the realities of the profession.

Whilst the early impact of COVID-19 has been devastating for the arts sector, chamber musicians have been employing their impressive skill sets and creative ingenuity to survive. Meanwhile, the value of music in bringing together communities and lifting people's spirits in the face of extreme adversity has been demonstrated in many different countries, countless times over. As we begin to emerge from the initial impact of the pandemic and plot a new course for the future of the music industry, we are presented with real opportunities for rebuilding the sector with a focus on inclusion and with new ways of engaging with music.

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