The Price of Experience: Understanding Young Musicians' Motivations for Youth Orchestra Participation

© *Maria Muñoz Lopez, Aix-en-Provence, July 2018*

Student Name: Vasiliki Bekiari

Student Number: 704701

Supervisor: Dr. Kristina Kolbe

Master Arts, Culture & Society

Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication

Erasmus University Rotterdam

Master Thesis

June 12, 2025

The Price of Experience: Understanding Young Musicians' Motivations for Youth Orchestra Participation

Abstract

Creative labour has been long catching the attention of sociological discussions on labour, due to its distinctive accounts of passion-driven persistence, regardless of its precarious conditions and embedded inequalities. Deeply institutionalised, with a history of elitism and exclusion, the classical music field exemplifies this paradox. Aligning with broader contemporary neoliberal shifts in the organisation of labour, it is becoming increasingly precarious, adopting production-based, temporal employment Yet, it continues to mask precariousness and forms of inequality under notions of meritocracy and passion-driven work, ultimately devoted to a cultural hegemony and closely related to middle-class and imperialistic hierarchies.

By bringing the underresearched youth orchestras to the fore, this thesis situates them within broader debates on creative labour, structural inequality and precariousness and the classical music ecosystem. Although powerful gatekeeping institutions within this ecosystem, serving as key educational spaces and offering symbolic capital to their members, youth orchestra participation lacks monetary compensation. Yet, youth orchestras remain highly popular amongst young and aspiring classical musicians. Reflecting on the intricate structural dynamics of the field, this phenomenon questions about how young musicians internalise, rationalise, and navigate these dynamics early in their careers. To address this gap, this thesis asks *what are the motivations behind young and aspiring musicians' unpaid participation in youth orchestras?* It investigates young and aspiring classical musicians' complex motivations behind unpaid participation in youth orchestras, in an attempt to shed light on how broader structures of creative labour intersect with musicians' subjectivities and career trajectories.

Focusing on the Dutch *Nationaal Jeugdorkest (NJO),* as a case study in a qualitative research approach, it draws on twelve semi-structured interviews with young classical musicians aged twenty to twenty-eight, educated in Dutch conservatories and originating from varied contexts. Their accounts were thematically analysed, reporting valuable and nuanced insights on creative labour, inequality and precariousness. The findings demonstrate a dynamic interplay of extrinsic, career-oriented goals, and intrinsic motivations, including emotional, social and passion-driven rewards, informing young musicians' motivations. These motivations reflect broader dynamics. Youth orchestras are ambivalently situated within the ecosystem, as powerful gatekeeper reproducing existing values and exclusions, yet they simultaneously operate against them, by fostering emotional support and artistic dynamics. This duality points to broader neoliberal dynamics, where passion and purpose are used to legitimise precariousness, and rationalise (self-)exploitation.

This research deepens our understanding of how young cultural workers navigate and make sense of exploitative structures in the creative industries. By foregrounding youth orchestras within debates on cultural labour, this research contributes to critical understandings of inequality, professional socialisation, and the affective economies of creative work. Last, it calls for institutional reflection and structural change to ensure fairer and more inclusive access to professional pathways in classical music.

KEYWORDS: *Creative Labour, Precariousness, Youth Orchestras, Inequality, Subjectivity*
Word count: 20,735

Table of Contents

1. Introduction 1

2. Theoretical Framework 4

2.1. The Creative Labour Market and Artistic Careers 4

2.1.1. Socio-economic Foundations 4

2.1.2. Structural and Intersectional Inequalities 5

2.1.3. Self-realisation and Emotional Economies of Creative Labour 7

2.2. The Classical Music Field 9

2.2.1. Historical Foundations, Social Hierarchies and Intersected Inequalities 9

2.2.2. Systemic Structures: Institutions, Careers and Precariousness 12

2.2.3. The Subjectivities and Trajectories of Classical Musicians 15

3. Methods 18

3.1. Case Study 18

3.2. Data Collection and Operationalisation 20

3.3. Sampling 22

3.4. Analysis 23

3.5. Researcher's Positionality and Reflexivity 23

4. Results and Discussion 25

4.1. Beyond Paychecks: What Drives Youth Orchestra Participation 26

4.1.1. Extrinsic Motivations: Strategic Aspirations and Career Development 27

4.1.2. Intrinsic Motivations: Passion, Identity, and Joy of Collective Performance 29

4.1.3. Returning for More: Experience as Motivation 31

4.2. Systemic Reflections: Youth Orchestras in the Classical Music Ecosystem 34

4.2.1. Gatekeepers, Networks and "Being in the System" 35

4.2.2. From Elitism to Inclusion: Access, Audience and Inequality 38

4.2.3. Institutionalisation of Creativity 41
4.3. Subjectivities in Formation: NJO Members' Narratives 45
4.3.1. Making it (or Not): Luck as an Interpretative Frame 46
4.3.2. Coping with Precariousness: Institutionalised Attitudes 48
4.3.3. Beyond Careers: Music as Identity and Meaning 50
5. Conclusion 53
References 58
Appendix A. Interview Guide 64
Appendix B. Overview of the Operationalisation of Relevant Concepts. 66
Appendix C. Codebook 67
Appendix D. Overview of Respondents 69
Appendix E. Findings Concept Map 72

Preface

This thesis has been a long time coming. Music has always been a major part of my life, ever since I laid my hands on a violin for the first time at the age of six and participated in a youth orchestra for the first time in Bulgaria, the summer of 2012. It has definitely been an intense journey, with its ups and downs. However, without the downs, I would not be here today. Amidst the most challenging times of being a violinist, I started wondering why does it have to be like that? This very inquiry ignited the desire to start digging. Because of it I found this Master's degree and because of it I picked this topic for my thesis. And I could not be more grateful. Throughout this transformative process, I found myself revisit some of my older ideas, and getting a little closer to finally making sense of what I could not. Who would have thought that all I needed was hearing Bourdieu's name about a million times to get there?

This thesis could not have been possible, or at least would not have this shape, without the guidance and support of my supervisor, dr. Kristina Kolbe. Her depth of knowledge in this field and topic were great sources of inspiration, while her emotional and academic support were always great companions and motivators to keep pushing. Alongside Kristina, I need to express my gratitude to all my teachers throughout the pre-Master and Master, who enthusiastically introduced me to a whole new world, the world of sociology. Additionally, I would like to thank my participants for sharing insightful conversations with me and for their eagerness to discuss their ideas. Finally, I would like to thank Maria for this incredible painting she drew of us the summer of 2018 at Aix-en-Provence, in between the rehearsals of the Orchestre des jeunes de la Méditerranée.

Last, but by no means least, I am deeply grateful for my friends and family for staying by my side throughout this process, which was definitely not linear. Thank you, mom and dad, for believing in me, and thank you Christina for listening to me whining, and for having my back. And of course, thank you my dear and lovely friends, the ones back home for your patience as I disappeared behind a screen for months, and the ones in Rotterdam who hang tight when my brain was fried. Thank you for always supporting me, for always being there and for loving me.

1. Introduction

The image of the *starving artist* has long been romanticised in the "western"[1] world. From Henri Murger's 1851 *Scènes de la vie de bohème,* to Giacomo Puccini's 1895 *La bohème* and Jonathan Larson's 1994 *Rent*, the bohemian, unstable and risky lives of artists have been celebrated across multiple narratives. These stories depict artists as driven by passion, rather than financial motivations, prioritising devotion to art over economic security. Aligning with this image, various scholars have attempted to theorise artistic behaviour and careers in the creative labour market. Hans Abbing (2002, p. 81) refers to a selfless devotion to art, while Pierre-Michel Menger (2006, pp. 776-777) mentions a labour of love, art for art's sake and psychic income motivating artists to engage with the creative and describes artists as risk-lovers.

However, beyond this romanticised image lies a different reality. Building on discussions of passion, David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker (2013, pp. 43-44) argue that creative work, ascribed with meaning and purpose, indeed becomes a space for self-realisation, yet, often inviting external and internal forms of exploitation. The creative labour market–especially for young artists–is characterised by a reality of precariousness and insecurity in occupational opportunities, high unemployment and underemployment rates, low or no pay, institutional and structural barriers and intersected inequalities of class, race and gender, amongst others. Access to stable employment is shaped by socio-economic privilege and pre-existing capital, while, the neoliberal ideologies are substituting unfixed contracts for temporal, project-based productions that heavily rely on self-employment models, network and entrepreneurial mindsets. These employment realities not only reinforce precariousness, but further emphasise inequality (Alper & Wassal, 2006, p. 856; Brook et al., 2020, p. 572; Eikhof & Warhust, 2013, pp. 16-17; Morgan & Nelligan, 2018, pp. 4-5, 65; Throsby, 1986, pp. 13-14). Furthermore, since the shift of its economic structure from patronage systems to mixed models of private and public subsidies in many countries, most notably in Europe, the sector remains reliant on private and/or public funding decisions, and often vulnerable to economic and political shifts, often translating to budget cuts (Hickson, 2017; Towse, 2019, p. 26).

---

[1] Following Kolbe's (2024) example, I use lowercase spelling and quotation marks for the words "western/west" and "non-western", to demonstrate sensitivity towards historical constructions and narrow dual understandings of race.

The classical music sector, with its deep institutionalised and elitist foundations, exemplifies these challenges. Deeply rooted in exclusionary traditions and norms that inherently privilege white, middle-class values, aesthetics and behaviours, prestigious educational institutions become powerful gatekeepers. By remaining highly selective, setting high standards for excellence and relying on exclusive networks, such institutions regulate access to and success in the classical music profession[2], rewarding privilege and reinforcing existing hierarchies and inequalities (Bull, 2019, pp. 27-33; Trienekens et al., 2024, pp. 389-390). Alongside this long tradition of hierarchies and exclusion, the prominent role of institutions in the field has been evident in the organisation of labour. Nonetheless, the historically stable, long-term employment offered by orchestras and opera houses amongst others, are increasingly being replaced by fixed-term contracts within a project-based production and freelance culture of labour, reflecting broader neoliberal shifts. As a result, stable jobs are more and more scarce, an oversupply of conservatory graduates persists, and working conditions become more and more precarious (Bennett & Hennekam, 2018; Menger, 2006; Scharff, 2017).

Within this environment, youth symphony orchestras often serve as transitional spaces, bridging education and professional employment and providing their members with valuable experience and qualifications (Orchestra, n.d.). Nonetheless, participation usually does not offer financial compensation, and yet, young musicians go the extra mile to become members. While extensive literature addresses unpaid labour in creative industries (Brook et al., 2020; Eikhof & Warhurst, 2013; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2013; Menger, 2006; Morgan & Nelligan, 2018), little is known about how youth orchestras interact with this phenomenon. Thus, important questions are raised. What do youth orchestras reveal about broader structural dynamics in the classical music ecosystem, and how young musicians make sense of it and justify unpaid labour, or are socialised to do so early on? In an attempt to address these questions, this study asks *what are the motivations behind young and aspiring musicians' unpaid participation in youth orchestras?* Through employing a qualitative approach and thematically analysing twelve semi-structured interviews, I explore the experiences and reflections of young musicians between the ages of twenty to twenty-eight, current or former students of Dutch conservatories, and of Nationaal

[2] Throughout the thesis, by "classical music profession", or simply "profession", I refer primarily to orchestral performers. While I acknowledge that the field includes various roles (e.g. soloists, teachers), this study focuses on orchestral musicians unless otherwise specified.

Jeugdorkest (NJO), from Spain, Greece, Cyprus, the Netherlands, Portugal and Australia. Their nuanced perspectives reveal valuable insights, contributing to current scholarship on the structural dynamics of the classical music ecosystem, creative labour[3] and labour in general, and musicians' subjectivities. Notably, this thesis sheds light on a so far underresearched phenomenon: how youth orchestras intersect with structural dynamics and inequalities in the creative "western" world, via NJO as its case study. Finally, it attempts to deepen our understanding of how unpaid labour is normalised in the arts and what it means for the next generation of classical musicians, insights that inform debates on fair labour practices and equity in the creative sectors.

Overall, this thesis argues that unpaid participation in youth orchestras is driven by a complex interplay of extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, linked to career advancement and to music as identity and meaning. Peeling back the layers of this complexity, I uncover that youth orchestras hold a crucial, yet ambivalent role within the ecosystem, reinforcing structural inequalities, while simultaneously serving as emotional sanctuaries, resisting norms. This ambivalence, I argue, illustrates how inequality, precariousness and passion are inherent parts of the ecosystem, manipulating its complex and often contradictory dynamics.

In what follows, I offer a review of the key debates in the sociology of creative labour, laying the theoretical foundation for this research. Moving from the creative industries to the classical music field, I critically analyse discourse on structural inequalities, precariousness and cultural workers' subjectivities and understandings. After setting the stage of the structural dynamics of the creative and classical music sector, I get to the heart of young musicians' narratives and negotiations. Next, I discuss my methods, data collection and analysis processes, I present my sample and its characteristics and how key theoretical concepts are operationalised. Also, I underline how my positionality as a white, middle-class, woman and former engagement with the classical music field inform my standpoint and perspectives, yet, reflexivity is maintained. Lastly, the findings section is organised according to the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the analysis and proceeds in three parts. Firstly, it discusses the motivations for unpaid youth orchestra participation, exploring extrinsic, intrinsic, and prior experiences and perceived rewards as motivations. Secondly, it unfolds the position of youth orchestras within

[3] I follow Hesmondhalgh and Baker's (2013, p. 9) use of the term "creative labour" in this thesis, to refer to "creative work in the cultural industries", with a main focus on artistic work.

the classical ecosystem, as gatekeeping institutions, how they interact with issues of inclusivity and accessibility in audience engagement, and the routinisation of music-making. Thirdly, it explores how young musicians make sense and navigate the field, through varied emotional and strategic mechanisms, and how broader dynamics are reflected on their nuanced understandings. Lastly, I conclude by discussing the limitations and implications of this research, and by sharing my recommendations.

2. Theoretical Framework

By laying the theoretical foundation for analytically exploring youth orchestras, in this chapter I draw attention to key debates from the fields of sociology, cultural studies, media studies and cultural economics. I begin by outlining the features of the creative industries, creative labour market and employment structures, as well as embedded inequalities. Building upon this, I zoom into the specific dynamics of the classical music sector, examining its historical roots, institutional logics and social hierarchies. Situated within an ecosystem marked by precariousness, elitism and exclusion, youth orchestras do not operate as isolated cultural projects. Thus, building a critical theoretical foundation around broader dynamics is necessary to understanding how young musicians navigate the field, and how its structures are reflected in their subjectivities and trajectories.

2.1. The Creative Labour Market and Artistic Careers

2.1.1. Socio-economic Foundations

The economic structure of the "western" art world has shifted over the last centuries, moving from a patronage system to what Ruth Towse (2019, pp. 26-27) calls "a mixed economy of public and private ownership and supply". Nonetheless, different balances of public and private ownership apply to different contexts, with most European countries relying on state funding and subsidies, while countries like the United Kingdom and the United States still and increasingly rely on private patronage and corporate sponsorship (McGuigan, 2016, pp. 66-68). Within such models and especially in the publically funded ones, the establishment of cultural policy also played a significant role in directing the cultural sector. In an attempt to counteract market outcomes through public funding and regulation, cultural policy enables governments to pursue specific cultural objectives and ensures access and participation, particularly where

private investment is inadequate (Towse, 2019, pp. 32-33). However, in times of crisis, the cultural sector is the first one to suffer from budget cuts (Srakar et al., 2017, p. 84), resulting in economic disparities.

Regardless of cultural policy's attempts to safeguard and regulate the sector, it does not exist in isolation. It is deeply embedded in broader socio-economic structures that shape access, opportunities, and career trajectories. Modern neoliberal ideologies, that are based around the concepts of free market, economic freedom through individualism and the prioritisation of private interests, are arguably most prominently present in the UK and the US, but significantly affect labour conditions across the globe, and in the Netherlands[4]. Creative labour is no exception, as neoliberalism has fostered an increasing precariousness in the field, where individuals are often compelled to act as "self-employed employees" in insecure and short-term roles, constantly seeking for the next project or fixed contract (McGuigan, 2016, pp. 10, 16-17, 27, 41; Menger, 2006, p. 774). "Project-based production" emerged to minimise financial risks of "in-house" organisational productions, resulting into a shift of employment models from contract-based to a freelance gig economy (Eikhof & Warhust, 2013, pp. 5-6; Morgan & Nelligan, 2018, p. 6). With the rise of self-managed freelance work, long-term employment becomes rare and scarce. Only few established cultural institutions –such as symphonic orchestras and opera houses– offer long-term employment opportunities, offering stability and status (Menger, 2006, pp. 771-772), and as a result, such opportunities are hard to come by and highly popular. Together with the persistent oversupply and consistent growth of artists over the last decades (Menger, 2006, pp. 782-784), the increase of "improvised and last-minute creative processes", and decline of unfixed employment, result into a highly saturated, competitive and insecure labour market, where "creative work patterns can be unpredictable and difficult to manage" (Morgan & Nelligan, 2018, p. 67).

2.1.2. Structural and Intersectional Inequalities

Whilst such models, otherwise referred to as "boundaryless" or Do-It-Yourself (DIY), allow for autonomy and flexibility (Arthur & Rousseau, 2001, p. 6; Bennet, 2018, p. 147), they

[4] In the Netherlands, the government policy started moving towards neoliberalism in 1982, with emphasis on privatisation and individualisation and a slogan of "more market, less government" (Van Apeldoorn, 2009, p. 215).

stimulate an intersection of gender, racial and social inequalities (Eikhof & Warhurst, 2013, p. 2). Although many scholars underline the meritocratic promise of creative labour due to its direct reliance on individual talent and creativity, and cultural workers' alleged immunity to traditional social hierarchies (Howkins, 2001 and Florida, 2004, as cited in Eikhof & Warhurst, 2013, p. 4), Doris Ruth Eikhof and Chris Warhurst (2013, pp. 6-7, 9-10) argue that talent alone cannot adequately explain access and success within the creative industries. Instead, they highlight how the project-based nature of production not only bypasses merit, but inherently fosters precarious working conditions, which in return translate to racial, gendered and social inequalities.

The primary focus of creative production on temporary projects leads to employment and wage instability, and forces new entrants to learn informally through low-paid or unpaid roles, as pathways to future employment. As a result, access is enabled for workers who can afford to compensate for low or no pay, either from parental financial support or alternative sources of income, which may simultaneously serve as a limitation, in terms of time, availability and flexibility (Eikhof & Warhust, 2013, p. 7). Orian Brook, Dave O'Brien and Mark Taylor's (2020, pp. 582-584) findings highlight the "affordances of age and social class" when it comes to unpaid labour, suggesting that older, middle-class cultural workers have better chances of affording unpaid labour, which serves as a gateway towards future employment. As a result, class mobility is limited, and simultaneously, precarious conditions are perpetually reproduced, for as long as workers already employed in creative jobs accept and rationalise them (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2013, p. 116).

Alongside unfair pay gaps for new entrants and inconsistency in employment, Eikhof and Warhust draw attention to the significance of network and recommendation for recruitment. Employers turn to their personal circuits of trusted collaborators, and as a result, building a network becomes necessary for sustaining a career in the creative industries. For this reason, familial social capital offers an advantage to children from wealthier families, as they are better exposed to the right environments and right people. On the other hand, access is less likely to be promised to workers from working class or ethnic minority backgrounds. In their study on the media industry in London, Ashika Thanki and Steve Jefferys (2006, p. 117) argue that dominant white, male elites often maintain control to preserve ideological stability, thus racialised outsiders are excluded, and broader racial, gender and social hierarchies are reproduced.

It is impossible to account for structural inequalities, without exploring gender. In a sector that women are often underrepresented, underpaid, experience discrimination and difficulty in securing a job (Miller, 2016, p. 119), Rosalind Gill (2002, p. 82) reports that gendered differences already start from early education, leading to gendered inequalities at later stages, including unequal access to opportunities and pay between women and men. Alongside formal expressions of gender inequality, informal structures of exclusion are prominent in the creative field. Private and male-dominated networks control job access, while the time and mobility demands of creative work disproportionately burden workers with childcare responsibilities, mainly women (Eikhof & Warhurst, 2013, p. 11; Gill, 2002, pp. 81-82; Morgan & Nelligan, 2018, pp. 85-86). As a result, it is more difficult for women to engage in crucial networking and sustain a career, contributing to mid-career resignation (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2013, pp. 147-148). Paradoxically, regardless of the reported accounts of gendered discrimination within the sector, Rosalind Gill (2002, pp. 83-84) highlights that systemic gender inequality is often masked by meritocratic ideals, leading women to internalise unequal outcomes as personal failure.

Crucially, the aforementioned dimensions of inequality, around gender, race and social class do not operate in isolation, but intersect to create systemic blockages and disadvantages for individuals entering and progressing within the sector. Highlighting the intersectional profile of inequalities in the creative sector, Ahu Tatli and Mustafa Özbilgin (2012, pp. 259-260) suggest that the alleged "openness" in terms of gender and sexual orientation is negatively affected by race and social class. At the same time, social class intersects with race, "due to the historical domination of middle and upper classes in the world of art" (Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012, p. 257) which leads to the notion of the ideal worker in the sector being white and of middle-class origin.

2.1.3. Self-realisation and Emotional Economies of Creative Labour

Given these intricate relationships between the organisation of creative labour and social inequalities, the question poses itself: why do people nonetheless aim to enter into creative professions? Indeed, project-based production and network-based selection and exclusion practices clearly shape who gains access to creative work, but they also inform how workers experience and make sense of their careers on a personal level (Christopherson, 2009, pp. 88-89;

Eikhof & Warhurst, 2013). In other words, their career subjectivities both reflect and are shaped by structural tensions of the field, rendering them central to creative labour discussions.

In this context, the concept of *self-realisation* comes into play. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2013, p. 140, 142-151) define self-realisation as "a sustained sense of good work", which promotes valuable "developing, flourishing, achieving excellence". They underline creative labour's capabilities for self-realisation, by offering opportunities for talent development and personal growth, and a sense of meaning and purpose. Such feelings of fulfilment are inherently linked to emotional rewards from, and a close-knit, "life-long commitment to a particular form of creative work" (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2013, p. 142), however, they may serve as the basis of self-exploitation. Accordingly, Angela McRobbie (2016, p. 111) discusses the "anomalies of passionate work", in the fashion sector, which rationalise and normalise a willingness to endure exploitation. Thus, it is precisely this deep emotional investment in one's work that renders creative workers more vulnerable to precariousness and self-exploitation, as their pursuit of self-realisation, together with recognition and creativity are often leveraged as a justification for high levels of employment insecurity, unfair pay and long working hours (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2013, p. 6)[5].

Yet, given the well-documented precariousness and economic disparities of creative labour, one cannot help but wonder why the oversupply of artists, otherwise defined by Morgan and Nelligan (2018, p. 65) as "creative underclass" still exists. Scholars have attempted to provide answers to that inquiry. Aligning with common beliefs, Sheldon and Corcoran (2019, p. 228) argue that when compared to businesspersons, artists are more driven by intrinsic motivation. Following a similar approach, Abbing presents artists as "selflessly devoted to art", agreeing with Menger's picture of artists as "irresistibly committed to a labour of love" and the concept of "art for art's sake", prioritising "psychic income" over monetary gains (Abbing, 2002, p. 81; Menger, 2006, pp. 776-777;). Finally, Menger presents another profile of artists being "risk-lovers", or, as Sen puts it, "rational fools", ambitious to "catch a break", even when such opportunities are usually closely related with uncertainty (Menger, 2006, pp. 776-777), resulting

[5] See also Hochschild (1983, p. 7) on emotional labour and Hardt and Negri (2000, p. 293) on affective labour, which further emphasise the emotional demands and gendered dynamics embedded in creative labour, alongside self-realisation (McRobbie, 2016, pp. 102-106; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2013, p. 110, 162)

in a non-traditional view of humans as rational decision-making individuals (Sen, 1982, pp. 104-105). In an attempt to provide valuable insights on the aforementioned inquiries, in the next chapter, I turn to the field of classical music, where a long-lasting tradition of etiquette, elitism and institutionalisation informs the intricate dynamics and structures of creative labour and artistic careers.

2.2. The Classical Music Field

In the previous sections, key theoretical discussions have been explored around creative labour and how it is socially and economically structured, as well as the unique features of artistic careers. The precarious character and exclusionary nature of artistic careers are highlighted, as those are often underpaid, unpaid and unstable, resulting into intersected inequalities, which disproportionately affect individuals from less privileged backgrounds (Brook et al., 2020, pp. 572, 582, 584; Bull et al., 2023, pp. 51-52). Coming from an institutionalised and elitist framework, the classical music field epitomises these concerns, by reproducing structural barriers, through unequal access to educational institutions and to a professional career (Bull, 2018, pp. 84, 89-90; Trienekens et al., 2024, pp. 389-390). This chapter explores the field's occupations, socio-economic dynamics and structures, and how broader inequalities around gender, class and race are reflected and reproduced, in an attempt to gain an understanding of its unique compositions.

2.2.1. Historical Foundations, Social Hierarchies and Intersected Inequalities

The classical music sector has been historically rooted in traditions of elitism, hierarchy and social stratification. Emerged as a cultural expression of European imperial and bourgeois values (Bull, 2019, pp. xiv, 48), the very term "classical", originating from the Latin *classis*, signals social stratification, similar to how "class" is currently used, and timelessness. In this way, Susanna Eastburn (2018, p. 141) highlights the embedded "connotations of clear hierarchies, of value judgements that are somehow objective and fixed across time, and of a principally Eurocentric view of culture", underscoring the genre's perceived cultural superiority. Drawing attention to the context of UK, the affiliation of classical music with the middle classes is explained by Anna Bull (2019, p. 14) through the establishment of formal classical music institutions and informal codes of conduct, like silent listening, and the sacralisation of music by

the emerging industrial bourgeoisie of the 19th century. This elitist tradition of classical music becomes evident in discussions on classed distinction and social reproduction.

Classical music functions as a powerful form of cultural capital, which Pierre Bourdieu (1986) defines as the various forms of embodied, objectified and institutionalised cultural knowledge and competencies, which can be converted into social and economic capital. Under a Bourdieusian light, his work on distinction and cultural hegemony (1985;1986) understands classical music as a tool for legitimising middle and upper classes' social status and power.[6] Reflecting on Bourdieu's theories, Kolbe (2024, pp. 57-58) highlights a structural tension embedded in classical music, "the relationship between concepts of cultural value and legitimacy". Classical music is perceived as a legitimate cultural expression, compared to other forms, underscoring its supremacy, distinction and cultural hegemony. This distinction is utilised for symbolic boundary drawing, translating legitimate taste and "being cultured" to social capital. As a result, being affiliated with classical music facilitates social distinction and mobility. On the other hand, the "autonomous principle" argues that classical music is independent of social, economic and political concerns, focuses on the notion of "art for art's sake", and presents the genre as "a universal form of beauty" (Bull, 2019, p. 6; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2013, p. 65). Nonetheless, Bull argues that the autonomous principle is a mere camouflage of broader social tensions and legitimisation strategies, that highlights the exclusionary character of classical music.

In contemporary practice, these classed dynamics are far from historical artefacts. Class hierarchies continue to be actively reproduced within classical music. Notably, the aesthetic demands of classical music–detail, precision, excellence and what Bull (2019, pp. 70-78) defines as "getting it right"– necessitate long-term investments in private lessons, sustained training with good teachers and expensive instruments. Hence, they call for a privileged financial background and reinforce exclusive access for middle- and upper-class individuals. Although efforts for socially-oriented music education have been made, with a primal example of Venezuela's *El Sistema,* Geoff Baker (2016, p. 24) argues that such efforts are only "re-normalising conventional practises of institutional music education of the past", by reproducing traditional structures. Thus, reproductions of social hierarchies are not only present in formal exclusions

[6] See also studies on cultural consumption and taste, cultural capital and distinction by Bennett et al. (2009), Friedman et al. (2015) and Goldin and Rouse (2000).

based on economic and social capital, but in hidden understandings of a "middle-class self" as well. They are expressed through the persistence of middle-class values and informal codes of conduct entrenched in classical music pedagogies, rehearsals and performances (Bull, 2019, as cited in Kolbe, 2024). In this way, social inequality and class distinctions are central in the very aesthetics, traditions and educational practices, shaping access, success and status in the field.

Together with the classed and institutionalised profile of the classical music field, scholars take account of its colonial and raced roots. Drawing on Mari Yoshihara (2008), Bull highlights the genre's white European historical and cultural origins, while Kristina Kolbe (2024, pp. 3, 21, 59-61) underlines its association with elitism and colonial logics of white supremacy. These origins are embedded in educational practices, repertoire and imperialist understandings of classical music as superior to "non-western" music traditions, which are often racially generalised and defined as "world music". In what Daniel Anderson (2015) calls a "white space", the classical music sector is an environment where whiteness dominates and musicians of colour often experience marginalisation and exclusion (Kolbe, 2024, p. 62), evident in the exemplary absence of "non-western" composers from the canon repertoire, established by formal institutions (Bull, 2019, p. 44; Kolbe, 2024, pp. 61-62). Although the "autonomous principle" illustrates classical music as a non-political art form, scholars underline persisting Orientalist tropes and postcolonial dynamics, reproducing stereotypes around Asian musicians, who are frequently portrayed as technically proficient but lacking genuine musicality or artistry (Yoshihara, 2008 and Leppänen, 2015 as cited in Bull, 2019, pp. 110-111; Yang, 2007, as cited in Scharff, 2017, p. 59; Yang, 2007, p. 13). Ultimately, the classical music field continues to function as a racialised and postcolonial space, where whiteness operates as an unspoken norm and the field's Eurocentric conception of values is reproduced through institutional practices and aesthetics.

Alongside its classed and racialised structures, the classical music field is profoundly shaped by gendered norms and inequalities. Regardless of the rising number of female entrants in conservatories, women are significantly underrepresented in positions of artistic authority and prestige, such as conductors, composers and principal players. Simultaneously, traditional gendered perspectives of "respectable femininity" render specific instruments like the piano, suitable for women, while composition or conducting not, resulting into unequally gendered opportunities that legitimise the male dominance of the field (Bull, 2019, pp. xx, 40; Scharff,

2017, pp. 42-43). These gendered expectations continue to shape the experiences of female musicians, who are often subjects to aesthetic scrutiny of physical appearance, sexualisation–particularly for women of colour–and cautious standards of self-promotion (Bull, 2019, pp. 99-100; Scharff, 2018, pp. 107-108; Yoshihara, 2008, p. 106). These dynamics translate to gender pay gaps, sexism and even harassment (Scharff, 2017, p. 106). Nonetheless, gender inequality remains silenced, reinforcing white and male chauvinism under a systemically sexist ecosystem, masked by gender-neutral meritocracy (Scharff, 2017, p. 108-110).

2.2.2. Systemic Structures: Institutions, Careers and Precariousness

Having discussed the classical music field's roots in a tradition of elitism and white male supremacy, I turn to the systemic dynamics that are unique to the sector and distinguish it from the creative sector in general. The classical music sector is characterised by a long tradition of practice passed down through formal institutions, that include conservatories, orchestras and festivals, amongst others. Bull (2019, pp. 27-28, 178) refers to "the institutional ecology of classical music–the framework of organisations that make up the classical music world", which dates back to the 19th century. As gatekeeper, conservatories and orchestras regulate the field by setting high standards for excellence through grade exams and audition systems, and by controlling access to professional careers and networks. By codifying how classical music is taught, rehearsed and performed, shaped by class, gender and race, they preserve its cultural authority and elite status. These mechanisms often mistake privilege for talent and elite access for meritocracy, disproportionately benefit those already in privileged positions. Finally, hierarchies are institutionalised within ensemble structures and pedagogical relationships, particularly through the authoritative roles of teachers and conductors, the latter of whom are predominately male, as I showed in the previous section, resulting into a persistent and institutionalised reproduction of social, race and gender inequalities (Bull, 2019, pp. 47-49, 178-186; Kolbe, 2024, pp. 57-59).

Within this institutional ecology, youth orchestras serve as important spaces for cultivating and maintaining the embodied practices and aesthetic values of classical music, including discipline, submission to the informal hierarchies of ability and authority, codes of conduct, technical precision and proficiency in canon repertoire (Bull, 2019, pp. 56, 82). In alignment with the broader precariousness of the creative industries and the absence of pay for

new entrants (Brook et al., 2020), participation in youth orchestras usually comes without pay, but is a necessary stepping stone towards an orchestra career. Certain youth orchestras, specifically national youth orchestras, hold a high status and maintain it by their strict selection processes. Consequently, such groups gather "'like-minded people' of the same 'calibre'" (Bull, 2019, p. 62), masking social exclusion with an alleged focus on merit, since excellence is reserved for those from privileged backgrounds who can afford elite musical training. Additionally, participation in youth orchestras also fosters powerful identity formation, often established in a white middle-class environment and encouraging young musicians to internalise the subjectivity of the "ideal classical musician" amongst those "like-minded" groups. Together, those features result into class formation and reproduction within the youth orchestra environment. Finally, collective music-making foster affective experiences and a sense of community, however, social relations marked by hierarchy, exclusion and competitiveness are emphasised (Bull, 2019, pp. 59, 62, 68, 173). Clearly, youth orchestras successfully fall into the institutional ecology embedded in the classical music field, managing access and reproducing inequalities, holding an important role in shaping future social compositions of the field. Yet, they remain underresearched.

Although many institutions now face pressure to address inequality and take action through diversity initiatives, inherent inequalities can make fundamental change difficult. Claudia Goldin and Cecilia Rouse (2000, pp. 737-738) present a positive effect of blind auditions on female musicians' occupational opportunities, since their introduction in US orchestra auditions from the 1950s onwards. Their findings argue that "the screen increases—by 50 percent—the probability that a woman will be advanced from certain preliminary rounds and increases by severalfold the likelihood that a woman will be selected in the final round", highlighting the determinant role gender inequalities and discriminations play on the structure of the classical music labour market. Likewise, Yang (2007, p. 16) demonstrates the positive impact of blind auditions on the inclusion of Asian candidates. Apart from efforts for gender and racial diversity, through blind auditions, and for social inclusion, through El Sistema and similar outreach programmes, formal institutions remain key sites of potential foundational change, mainly possible through diversification of curricula, pedagogy and repertoire, redistribution of resources and rethinking of safeguarding and selection practices (Baker, 2016; Bull, 2019, p. 188; Goldin & Rouse, 2000; Kolbe, 2024, p. 54).

Classical music's rootedness in institutions is evident in the broader structures of the labour market within the field as well. Traditionally, artistic careers were structured through secure, long-term positions in established institutions, such as symphony orchestras, opera houses and conservatories, offering a relatively predictable professional trajectory. However, the widespread rise of project-based production and neoliberal labour practices in creative labour that I discussed in chapter 2.1.1, has expanded in the classical music realm too. Today, orchestras tend to operate on a freelance basis, while recent budget cuts have caused several orchestras to shut down completely. Yet, an excess artist supply steadily rises, resulting into an ecosystem, where employment security and stability becomes the exception (Scharff, 2017, p. 21). Within this scarcity of full-time and permanent employment, classical musicians are increasingly self-employed (Bennett & Hennekam, 2018, p. 119), and have "portfolio careers", compelled to stay versatile and adaptable (Scharff, 2017, p. 21). Although such employment structures allow for flexibility, independence (Menger, 2006, pp. 771-773), they are characterised by low pay, uncertainty and lack of work benefits, including pensions, health insurance and maternity leave (Scharff, 2017, pp. 21, 144). Within this precarious environment, classical musicians are often compelled to hold multiple jobs, whether outside the creative realm, or as teachers. Nonetheless, employment in formal educational institutions, like conservatories, is also suffering from reforms, trading unfixed for temporary employment contracts (Menger, 2006, pp. 771-773; Scharff, 2017, pp. 21, 140-144).

The aforementioned precarious conditions of the classical music labour market are not merely a result of broader shifts in the creative economy, as I showed in chapters 2.1.1 and 2.1.2, but also a product of the field's unique structural and historical characteristics. Established and prestigious educational institutions set strict entry requirements, demanding high investments in training and access to elite networks, only possible through pre-existing economic and social capital. In this way, the field's exclusionary character and cultural hierarchy are reinforced, privileging those from middle- and upper-class background, who can afford private lessons, quality instruments, and unpaid work in an environment that stable and consistent opportunities are already very hard to come by. Simultaneously, the field's dominant norms and aesthetic practices continue to reflect a white, male and Eurocentric standard, marginalising those who do not fit into that description. Thus, the classical music labour market operates as a stratified ecosystem, mirroring the broader structures of the creative economy and the deep roots of

classical music in specific hierarchies, where precariousness is unevenly distributed across intersecting lines of class, gender and race. Having shed light on the intricate dynamics that make up the classical music field and labour market, I return to the previously mentioned inquiry, *why do creative workers still sign up for such a precarious environment?* Diving deeper into the specifics of the field, in the next section, I examine how classical musicians internalise, navigate and make sense of their career trajectories.

2.2.3. The Subjectivities and Trajectories of Classical Musicians

In the previous sections, I argued that the classical music field is shaped by powerful institutional legacies, aesthetic traditions and embedded hierarchies. The bureaucratisation of creative work through institutional control and codified systems point to Max Weber's concept of iron cage, that refers to the process of entrapment of individuals due to bureaucratic rationalisation. Even though institutions indeed shape informal and formal structures of the field, Per Mangset, Bård Kleppe and Sigrid Røyseng's (2012, pp. 157, 173) findings argue that "the musicians in the Orchestra enjoy the relative freedom and democratic power of a rather soft bureaucratic organisation". Still, even though classical music's institutions often impose bureaucratic constraints, musicians' experiences are equally shaped by internalised norms, emotional connections, and identity commitments—factors that not only reinforce but also complicate these external pressures.

Despite being confronted with precariousness, low or no pay and uncertainty, many musicians persist, driven by passion, love and intrinsic rewards. Scharff (2017, p. 141) underlines "an ambivalent relationship with work in the classical music profession" and argues that while classical musicians acknowledge the negative aspects of precarious work, they derive high levels of joy and pleasure from playing, "being in the zone", self-expression and communication with others (see also Yoshihara, 2008, p. 223). However, drawing on Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, Bull (2018, p. 80-81) argues that "pleasure threatens to interfere with the (conscious and unconscious) rational decision-making" within a Bourdieusian model of strategic longer-term "capital accumulation". These intrinsic rewards often act as justifiers for accepting and enduring precarious work, providing meaning to music-making that compensates for the instability of the profession (Scharff, 2017, p. 155). The emotional fulfilments of simply playing music are inherently tied to musicians' social identity, already cultivated from early on through

intensive stages of musical training (Bull, 2019, p. 179). This connection translates to an integral dedication to music itself, and to difficulties in separating the self from work, resulting into a constant need to prove one's self through music-making and an understanding of one's self-worth through musical success (Scharff, 2017, p. 22).

Alongside intrinsic motivations and justifications based on meaning and musical identities, the scholarship accounts for other coping mechanisms that allow classical musicians to navigate the field. Scharff (2017, p. 154-156) accounts for a "wilful ignorance" towards the precarious conditions of the field that normalises uncertainty, and for rationalising precariousness within a "hope labour" and "the big break narrative", which promise future employment opportunities (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013 and Taylor & Littleton, 2012, in Scharff, 2017, p. 145). In order to navigate the project-based and temporary employment models, classical musicians adopt entrepreneurial mindsets, treating careers as flexible, self-managed projects that require networking, personal branding and discipline (Scharff, 2017, p. 23). While such mindsets allow musicians to adapt to a competitive, saturated labour market, they also place the burden of success and failure solely on the individual, oftentimes resulting in mental illness, even depression. As such, structural constraints, such as the lack of stable employment or institutional support, are frequently reinterpreted through narratives of personal responsibility, merit, and resilience (Scharff, 2017, p. 115; Yoshihara, 2008, pp. 152-153).

Additionally, and as I have shown in previous sections (see 2.2.1 and 2.2.2), the *ideal classical musician* is not neutral, but shaped by classed, gendered and racialised expectations, deeply rooted in the historical origins of the field. This image aligns with middle-class and Eurocentric values of self-regulation, long-term investments and emotional control, resulting in alienation and marginalisation of those less privileged (Bull, 2019, p. 25). Women are prone to struggle with norms of modesty and be penalised for self-promotion, while musicians of colour might be subjected to racialised stereotypes that question their musicality or authenticity. Even so, such structural inequalities are often left unspoken, allowing deep-rooted hierarchies to persist, stalling progress towards diversity (Bull, 2019, p. 109-110; Kolbe, 2024, p. 52; Scharff, 2018, p. 104-105). At its core, classical music continues to hold strong personal and artistic meaning, yet, this appeal sits uneasily within a field still marked by exclusion and precariousness. Musicians internalise and rationalise structural norms, or choose the path of ignorance and silent acceptance, in an attempt to make sense and navigate the precarious field

and its emotional costs. It is therefore clear that the interplay of the relevant stakeholders is highly complex and dynamic. Although I have demonstrated that structural inequalities related to gender and race are critical for understanding the field, as they intersect with broader social hierarchies and dynamics, the scope of this thesis did not allow me to empirically examine how they unfold in practice. Nonetheless, they remain essential for contextualising the sector and merit further exploration.

Building upon the aforementioned theoretical insights on the structural dynamics, inequalities and aesthetic norms of the classical music field and the creative industries in general, I ask *what are the motivations behind young and aspiring musicians' unpaid participation in youth orchestras?* Being situated within an ecosystem of precariousness, institutionalisation and embedded inequalities, youth orchestras–and the absence of monetary remuneration from participation–become an excellent example of how this ecosystem is shaped and sustained. As discussed elsewhere, youth orchestras play a prominent role in shaping the field and reproducing existing dynamics alongside other institutions like conservatories, however, they remain understudied (Bull, 2019, p. 29). As transitional spaces between education and professional orchestra labour, I expect that youth orchestras transmit and negotiate precarious conditions, cultural values, institutional norms and social hierarchies and that motivation for participation reveals valuable insights on how the systemic structures of the field influence its workers. Given the reported precariousness, exclusivity, and inequality of the classical music labour market, I aim to explore how young classical musicians make sense of the field and its challenges, how they navigate its impact on their personal and professional trajectories and what motivates their participation in youth orchestras, even without financial rewards. I seek to analytically examine how social factors, together with the formal structures of the field, shape experiences and motivations for participating in these ensembles. Therefore, with this study, I attempt to expand Bull's (2019) discussions on young musicians understandings and Scharff's (2017) exploration on subjectivity, with a focus on youth orchestras, and by doing so, uncover their position in the field, in relation to occupational struggles and intersected inequalities, as perceived by its members.

3. Methods

3.1. Case Study

This research employs a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews, as it serves its focus point–the exploration of the subjective motivations, experiences and reflections of young musicians–more efficiently (Grønmo 2019, pp. 11-14). By gaining an understanding on the subjectivities of young musicians, this paper provides insights on how intersected economic, social, gender and racial inequalities in the classical music field, as well as its systemic structures inform young and aspiring musicians' choices and perceptions. I select *Nationaal Jeudgorkest (NJO)*, the national youth orchestra of the Netherlands, as the case study for this research. The reason behind a case study approach is to gain an in-depth understanding of a complex social phenomenon from a real-world perspective (Yin, 2018, p. 35). The selection of NJO fulfils the necessary prerequisite for providing an answer to the research question, due to the orchestra's mission, participation requirements and location (Grønmo 2019, pp. 160-161) and offers information-rich and relevant insights on the nuanced subjectivities of young musicians.

NJO was founded in 1957 and has been serving as a "stepping stone to a professional career for conservatoire students" ever since. It accepts "young top talent aged 18 to 26 years", young instrumentalists who are studying at a conservatoire in The Netherlands or Belgium, as well as those of a Dutch citizenship studying at a conservatoire elsewhere. It receives fundings from funds and municipalities in the Netherlands, some private sponsors and support from its "Friends of the NJO" programme. NJO organises two large projects, the summer one that includes performances in the Muziekzomer Gelderland frequently followed by an (international) tour, and the winter tour that involves performances in the larger halls of the country, and collaborates with renowned conductors, soloists and coaches. The orchestra selects its participants through annually held auditions and membership is valid for a duration of two years for tutti[7] players, whilst for principal positions auditions are held before every project. Alongside the yearly projects, NJO organises other productions, including chamber music and opera, exchange programmes with other national youth orchestras across Europe, and professional

[7] Tutti refers to an orchestra musician that does not hold a principal position, and performs the tutti (translated from Italian to 'all together') part of a symphonic piece. For more information on the structures and hierarchies of the symphony orchestra, see Serenade Team (2025).

projects for promotional purposes and in collaboration with professional orchestras, opera houses and other organisations of the Netherlands. Furthermore, it holds coaching sessions on musicological backgrounds, physical and mental health, injury prevention, career development, entrepreneurship and profiling & marketing. Participation is not monetarily compensated, apart from the professional projects, to which current members together with alumni, participate only upon invitation and sometimes receive payment. Nonetheless, participation is also free of charge. Rehearsals take place five to ten days before the start of the performances in Apeldoorn, while accommodation and meals are covered by the orchestra. NJO, like other youth orchestras, follow similar formal structures and informal codes of conduct to professional symphonic orchestras. Young musicians need to be present in all rehearsals and well-prepared. The rehearsals last from three to six hours per day, and artistic work appears rather standardised throughout the duration of the project. Members reside collectively in a hostel in Apeldoorn, facilitating sustained periods of interaction and socialisation (Auditie & Musici, n.d.; Home - NJO, n.d.; Home, n.d.; NJO & NJON, 2023).

NJO holds a prominent role within the classical music ecosystem of the Netherlands. Through its national and international partners, it creates a wide network with institutions, conservatories, cultural organisations and professionals within the classical music sector of the Netherlands and Europe. Through its network and professional projects, it serves as a gateway to the professional field, and "bridge[s] the gap between the mainly individual conservatoire training that focusses on technique and theory and the reality of professional practice" (Talent development, n.d.). The aforementioned functions of NJO as a networking, educational and pre-professional space, define it as an ideal case for investigating youth orchestras' function within the field of classical music. The fact that all participants must be studying at a Dutch or Belgian conservatory reflects on their commitment, professional training and possible aspirations to acquire professional careers in the field of classical music. Important to note here is that having a Dutch or a Belgian nationality is not a requirement for this orchestra, therefore, the participants can have an international background. This condition is significant, as it can provide interesting insights on different perceptions coming from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, NJO's self-identification as a *stepping stone* towards a professional career, underlines its powerful influence over access to the field and gatekeeping prospects. Finally, NJO is based in the Netherlands, which allows for in person interviews, enabling in-depth insights and minimising

limitations. Taken together, these characteristics establish NJO as a strategically positioned case for examining how youth orchestras function within the classical. Thus, studying NJO's participants allows for valuable insights on how they negotiate their unpaid participation, and how broader structural dynamics are reflected on their decision-making processes.

3.2. Data Collection and Operationalisation

The selected method for this exploration is semi-structured interviews. This method allows for in-depth understandings of the nuanced perspectives of young musicians, zooming in on their motivations and subjectivities and exploring broader reflections of the structures of the field from their personal trajectories. By remaining flexible and reflexive throughout the data collection, this method enabled me to dive deeper into interesting emerging concepts, encourage my participants to account for themselves and reach detailed insights and maintain an inductive research approach (Grønmo 2019, pp. 195-196; Nomnian, 2009, pp. 59-61). Prior to data collection, an interview guide was created around the following topics: demographics, (musical) educational background, motivations, decision-making factors, perceptions of the classical music labour market and artistic careers, ensuring that the interview guide aligns with the study's theoretical framework. The complete interview guide can be found in Appendix A. These categories are informed by existing discussions on creative labour and creative careers, inequalities and institutional barriers in the classical music field.

Understanding demographic backgrounds is essential in order to address how inequalities shape access to artistic careers in the sector (Brook et al., 2020; Bull, 2018; Bull et al., 2023; Trienekens et al., 2024). Following Trienekens et al.'s *Hiddenness Index* (2024, pp. 395-396), factors such as place of residence, socio-economic background, family's cultural background, ethnocultural background, and support are considered, and participants are asked to self-identify in terms of gender. Together with the reasons for starting musical training and current employment status, these factors assess the role of financial support and socio-economic background in affordability of unpaid orchestra participation. Furthermore, by exploring participants' current and previous musical training and education, the role of formal institutions in enabling access to classical music careers is examined (Bull, 2019). Questions about duration of training, highest qualifications or diplomas, previous education and current study level help

contextualise musicians' professional aspirations in relation to the institutionalised character of the sector.

The central focus of the research question is the motivations of young musicians for joining youth orchestras, with NJO as the reference point. Thus, these are separated into intrinsic factors, including "psychic income", artistic fulfilment and "art for art's sake", and extrinsic factors, such as career advancement and networking (Abbing, 2002, p. 81; Brook et al., 2020; Hannay, 1954, pp. 44–46; Menger, 2006, pp. 776–777). Furthermore, following Bull's (2018, p. 90) study on young musicians' pathways, self-selection factors in decision-making will be considered, including school-based provision, which also corresponds to the role of the institution, parental encouragement versus discouragement, and the individual's social identity. These factors allow for a nuanced understanding of the possible interplay of deliberate and external influences in young musicians' occupational choices. Finally, a section of the interview explores the participants' perceptions of the classical music labour market and careers, particularly in relation to precariousness, insecurity, freelance versus tied to an institution form of career, unpaid or low-paid labour and reliance on non-creative income (Alper & Wassall, 2006, p. 856; Bennett, 2018, p. 147; Brook et al., 2020, p. 572; Morgan & Nelligan, 2018, pp. 4–5, 65; Throsby, 1986, pp. 13–14).

These theory-informed topics were considered during the interview guide construction, but flexibility and adaptability were maintained throughout the data collection, following the participants' narratives and allowing for new, unprecedented insights to emerge from the interviews, aligning with the nature of semi-structured qualitative interviews, leading to a combination of a deductive and inductive approach (Grønmo 2019, p. 87). An overview of the operationalisation discussed is in Appendix B.

The interviews lasted sixty minutes on average and were conducted during the month of April 2025; six of them virtually, and the rest in person. Additionally, they were recorded and transcribed into text for further secondary analysis purposes, using the software *TurboScribe.ai*. Prior to the beginning of the interview, informed consent was granted, ensuring that the participants are properly aware of the procedure, the processing of their personal data and of the voluntary nature of their participation. I ensured anonymity and confidentiality throughout all stages of the research process, and data was securely stored and only accessible to the researcher

and supervising professor. These procedures align with the ethical requirements and guidelines provided by Erasmus University Rotterdam.

3.3. Sampling

The sample for this research consists of twelve young musicians between the ages of twenty and twenty-eight years old, that are either current or former members of the NJO. A snowball sampling method was employed, starting from a contact in order to identify relevant participants. This method was employed as an attempt to gain access to a relatively closed circle, while understanding this sampling method's limitations in terms of representation and diversity (Bryman, 2012, pp. 202-203). Nonetheless, representation and diversity were aimed for, to the extent this method allows for, resulting into an analytically rich and suitable to the research question sample. As the data collection process proceeded, I made the decision of adjusting the sampling requirements from young musicians between the ages of twenty to twenty-six and current members, to ages until twenty-eight and either current or former members. This decision was made partly for convenience reasons and partly with the purpose of expanding the subjective perspectives of the participants to young musicians already exposed to the classical music labour market and its dynamics.

The sample presents a balanced ratio of male to female gender identities, as well as a range of national backgrounds, including Dutch, Greek, Spanish, Portuguese, Cypriot, British and Australian. However, it lacks ethnocultural diversity, as the majority of the interviewees have a white ethnocultural background, and only one of them identifies as a person of colour. In terms of socio-economic background, most interviewees were brought up in middle class environments, except for Elena, Sarah and Dylan whose childhood environments were described as rather working class or lower middle class. It is important to stress here that the nuanced perspectives of the participants are very much affected by the diverse national and social contexts they were brought up in. Therefore, the socio-political environments of the Netherlands, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Cyprus, the UK and Australia are considered during the analysis process.

All participants are enrolled in bachelor or master programmes in, or have recently graduated from, Dutch conservatories, such as Codarts Rotterdam, Koninklijk Conservatorium Den Haag (KonCon), Utrechts Conservatorium (HKU) and Conservatorium van Amsterdam

(CvA). Additionally, they are in various stages of transitioning into professional classical music careers, varying from inconsistently to regularly freelancing, while others hold secondary part-time jobs in different fields. The sampling logic allows for nuanced insights on how young musicians navigate the intricate structures and dynamics of the field, enriched by the diverse contexts and backgrounds of the participants. Yet, the middle-class background of most of the participants already hints to the perpetuation of a "middle-class self" understanding within the field. A full overview of the characteristics of the sample is presented in Appendix D.

3.4. Analysis

The collected interview data was thematically analysed, using the software *Altas.ti,* with the intention of identifying significant and relevant themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). This analytical method is particularly suitable for this research due to its flexible and reflexive character. Keeping in mind the aforementioned operationalisation, and the pre-defined and theoretically informed themes, I coded the transcripts of the interviews inductively and deductively, using a combination of theory-driven and data-driven approaches. Broader thematic categories resulted from the clustering of initial open coding, which captured recurring and significant concepts. These categories were further refined and organised into overarching themes that best address the research question, while allowing for new insights to emerge. Open codes, such as *gains from orchestra, institutions gatekeeping, normalising precariousness* and *identity,* lead to ten sub-themes, which were then organised into three overarching themes: motivations for unpaid participation in youth orchestras, youth orchestras in the classical music ecosystem and navigating the profession. In this way, the analysis provided valuable and extensive insights on the young musicians' motivations, subjectivities and reflections on broader structures of the classical music field and labour market, as well as the dynamic positioning of youth orchestras within this environment. The detailed codebook of the thematic analysis is located in Appendix C.

3.5. Researcher's Positionality and Reflexivity

In qualitative research, the researcher is not a neutral observer, but "a central figure who influences the collection, selection and interpretation of data" (Finlay, 2002, p. 531). Along these lines, in her work on feminist objectivity, Donna Haraway (1991, p. 190; 2013, p. 459) argues

that knowledge is situated and tied to limited location, emphasising that "only partial perspective promises objective vision". In agreement with Haraway, Sandra Harding (1986, pp. 26-27) discusses the *standpoint theory* and highlights a necessity for knowledge to begin from the experiences of specific groups, rather than "the falsely universalising perspective of the master", who is frequently male and white. Indeed, partial perspective allows for objective vision; however, the significance of reflexivity is underlined in ensuring transparency and clarity throughout the different stages of research and acknowledging the co-construction of meaning and knowledge. With a higher goal of achieving objective vision and impartiality, I reflect on the positionality I bring into this research, by exploring my socially situated background and "the dynamics of the researcher-researched relationship" (Finlay, 2002, p. 532-534).

I approach this study as a white, middle-class, cisgender woman, born and raised in Thessaloniki, the second-biggest city in Greece. I began my involvement with the classical music world at an early age, with private violin lessons at the age of seven. I graduated from the State Conservatory of Thessaloniki and Department of Music Science and Art of University of Macedonia, with a major in classical violin performance and have been a member of youth orchestras throughout my whole educational journey, and still to this day. I have experienced the classical music labour market in the context of Greece first hand, working as a freelancer and as a violin teacher in my early twenties, prior to extending my academic journey to the field of Cultural Sociology. The classical music scene in the context of Greece is rather small. Major symphonic orchestras add up to merely four state-funded organisations, two in the capital city of Athens, and two in Thessaloniki, while only one opera house is located in Athens and smaller ensembles are found in the perimeter (Orchestras in Greece, n.d.). Stable performing job opportunities are, therefore, limited and scarce, and unless tied to the aforementioned institutions, crucially underpaid. Yet, even within this precarious environment, recruitment is heavily based on exclusive networks and nepotism, and as a result, most classical musicians turn to teaching or other forms of income for financial stability. Finally, the classical music sector in Greece aligns with the socially exclusive image of classical music I illustrated in chapter 2.2, as access to the profession is reserved for financially and socially privileged individuals.

The financial and emotional challenges I came across through my involvement with the precarious conditions of the field informed my decision to segue into an alternate academic path, but also formulated an array of sociological inquiries. In other words, my proximity to the field

and the high levels of precariousness and instability led to the genesis of this research project. It informed all parts of the research process, from gaining access to the closed circle of young musicians and the interviews to the interpretation of the data. My experience as an insider allowed for trust building with the participants and gaining a deep understanding of their nuanced perspectives, yet it also required conscious and reflexive distancing in order to avoid over-identification, assumptions or overlooking dissonant narratives. That being said, although my experience with the precarious nature of the field allows for deep understandings, my social identity and privileged background translate into a certain alignment bias with my participants. Acknowledging my social and ethnocultural background allowed me to reflect on the limitations of situated knowledge, as I might have been able to relate to my participants who share similar backgrounds, in contrast to people of colour or working class backgrounds, on their sense-making and navigating the classical music field. Other methodological risks included researcher and confirmation bias (Finlay, 2002, p. 543). In an attempt to mitigate the aforementioned methodological risks, I adopted a reflexive attitude. During interviews, I treated familiar terms as analytically "strange" and encouraged participants to elaborate further, and I kept an academically distanced position during data analysis. Ultimately, I recognised my positionality as an interpretive tool, allowing for deeper contextual understandings and empathy towards the participants, while remaining sensitive to its methodological risks.

4. Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the main findings of this research, which emerged through the thematic analysis of twelve qualitative interviews with NJO's current or former members. In an attempt to provide an answer to the research question, it explores their motivations for unpaid participation in NJO and other youth orchestras, and how they navigate these experiences. Apart from NJO, the participants frequently mention *Joven Orquesta Nacional De España (JONDE)*, the national youth orchestra of Spain (Jonde, n.d.). Although the primary focus remains on understanding the individual and collective rationales behind unpaid labour, explored via unpaid participation mainly in NJO and on occasion in other youth orchestras, the findings also reveal valuable insights on the professional culture of classical music more widely. The young musicians' nuanced narratives and perspectives reflect broader structures within the classical

music field, which in return inform their choices and aspirations, as the role of youth orchestras is examined in the dynamic interplay of different stakeholders of the field.

The analysis is structured around three main themes. The first theme explores the motivations behind young musicians' unpaid participation in youth orchestras, and discusses three sub-themes: extrinsic, intrinsic motivation and prior experience as drivers. The second theme examines how youth orchestras are situated within the classical music ecosystem and explores how broader field dynamics, such as gatekeeping, funding disparities, audience engagement and the institutionalisation of creativity are reflected in their function. Finally, the third theme focuses on how young musicians navigate and make sense of the profession and its precarious conditions, through the lens of luck, coping strategies, and identity and meaning in music-making. Together, these themes illuminate how youth orchestras function as both formative and contradictory spaces, shaped by and shaping the field and its stakeholders. A visual representation of how these themes interconnect is located in Appendix E.

4.1. Beyond Paychecks: What Drives Youth Orchestra Participation

So, why do young and aspiring musicians join a youth orchestra unpaid? In an effort to address this question, this section discusses the motivations of former or current members of NJO to join the orchestra, while also attending to the interplay of emotional, artistic, and symbolic value derived from youth orchestra experiences. Aligning with theory-driven expectations, the participants' accounts suggest a medley of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Apart from understanding their participation as a strategic step towards better future career opportunities in the field of orchestra performing, a great share of participants underline the significance of enjoyment, love for music, affect and collective music-making as drivers of their decisions. Notably, participation motivations are often entangled rather than distinct. When asked why they wanted to participate in NJO, most respondents reflected on cherished memories from earlier youth orchestra projects. Their answers reveal that participation is not driven by anticipated outcomes alone, but also by the remembered rewards from previous experiences. The following sections explore the aforementioned motivations, by examining extrinsic and intrinsic motivators and finally, by discussing previous experiences as drivers.

4.1.1. Extrinsic Motivations: Strategic Aspirations and Career Development

"Well, the most important thing is that young people have a place to play and to learn how to play in a group which you cannot learn in theory." – Mary

Throughout all twelve interviews, youth orchestras were described as a means to gain orchestral training, become familiar with the specifics of the orchestra instrumentalist profession and expand one's musical network. Many respondents approached youth orchestra participation as a strategic move to advance their professional aspirations of becoming orchestra musicians. This particular job position proved highly popular amongst the interviewees, as it offers stability and security compared to freelancing. Learning how to be part of an ensemble, adhering to the informal orchestra hierarchies and understanding how to behave professionally are described as skills that are only possible to be attained in practice. "Because you really learn by doing and not only playing in a room here on your own", Riley explains. Apart from technical excellence on one's instrument, which is achieved with private practice, these skills are determinant on whether an orchestra position is secured after the trial period of a successful orchestra audition. When describing her perception of the youth orchestra's role, 26-year-old cellist Mary suggests that

> [t]hat's why there are many people that win auditions in orchestras that they don't really have a lot of experience in orchestras and they don't get a permanent job after the trial period. (...) Because in order to learn how to play in an orchestra you have to play in an orchestra and you can't really do that immediately into the job.

This preparational function of youth orchestras is understood by Alexis "as being on an internship". Additionally, youth orchestras offer the opportunity to rehearse and perform "canon" orchestral repertoire–which is usually included in the programming of most professional orchestras. By what Alexis describes as "running through repertoire", young musicians learn demanding pieces and are better prepared to perform in professional orchestras. Furthermore, youth orchestras often collaborate with renowned professionals of the field, conductors such as Anthony Hermus conducting NJO, and tutors from prestigious professional orchestras, allowing

their members to expand their network and gain valuable learning experiences. Those interactions, together with opportunities to perform in acclaimed concert halls, were often part of the appeal–participants saw youth orchestras as a way to strengthen one's professional profile, serving as key assets on their CV and to expand future career possibilities. Highlighting the significance of a strong CV, Dylan explains how in the specific context of Spain, a good CV acts as a gateway to career opportunities. He shares,

> for example, last year I wrote to the principal (...) of Canary Islands Orchestra (...) and I told him, OK, I'm freelancing. If you need at any time a replacement, here you have my CV. So at least here in Spain, if they see that you have been in JONDE, they say, OK, he has passed a big filter. So after seeing my curriculum also that I was in an academy and he got me for two projects.

Dylan's story underlines how participation in prestigious youth orchestras, like JONDE and NJO, becomes an important advantage in one's CV, promising future career opportunities, a fact that highlights youth orchestras' function as gatekeepers (Bull, 2019, p. 28), and is further unpacked in chapter 4.2.1.

Finally, NJO's prestigious reputation was a strong motivator for many, who viewed its selectivity as a valuable credential for future CV-building, as in the Dutch conservatory landscape, NJO is recognised by teachers and peers alike as a serious and selective ensemble. The highly competitive auditions and the "fuss" around participating in NJO amongst conservatory students result into perceiving admission to the orchestra as necessary for one's successful musical journey. Jordan mentions how "especially in Utrecht, if you get into NJO, especially in the first years, it's really a thing. It's not very common for people in first and second year to get accepted." For aspiring orchestra musicians, such affiliations signal competence, often promising access to a highly competitive labour market, highlighting youth orchestras' "trampoline" into future employment function, as graphically described by Dylan.

These narratives demonstrate how participation in youth orchestras is not only driven by the development of musical and instrumental skill, but is strategically pursued for the hope of future employment, especially within a highly competitive, precarious and institutionalised field.

In this way, youth orchestras emerge as institutional sites where aspiring musicians seek to accumulate symbolic and social capital, under a "hope labour" that promises future employment (Bull, 2019, p. 28; Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013 in Scharff, 2017, p. 145).

4.1.2. Intrinsic Motivations: Passion, Identity, and Joy of Collective Performance

"When you feel music elevates you, you are not anymore one musician, one person sitting on the desk. You are a whole." – Alexis

Beyond strategic aspirations, my respondents spoke about the deep emotional and meaningful artistic experienced through youth orchestra participation. These drivers did not compete with the extrinsic motivations discussed in the previous section, but rather complemented them, uncovering a complex and layered medley of incentives. Aligning with the concept of "art for art's sake" (Hannay, 1954; Abbing, 2002), the data suggests that passion for music, creativity and emotional fulfilment, often justify the time and energy invested in youth orchestra projects. Eleonora, when discussing her first experience with a youth orchestra performing Tchaikovsky's fifth symphony, describes how amazed she was with getting "so much energy out of something that costs a lot of energy. It was really this interesting interaction of energy that is so rewarding." This rewarding experience was often linked to performing pieces with extended artistic value, articulating creativity, artistry and music-making as important factors influencing young musicians' decisions that often overshadow the lack of monetary compensation during their decision-making processes. Mary explains how,

> it's very intense moments you have in a youth orchestra because everyone is playing in a concert because they love it, not because they get paid enough to do that. Music making is really beautiful in every project of a youth orchestra I've had. Because everyone is there because they care, they want it.

For many interviewees, playing music was not only a creative outlet but an integral part of their identity. Being a musician was often regarded as something normal and internalised as a

core part of identity. “I think it's always been kind of my thing, what I kind of did”, Jordan explains, while Blake mentions how “flute was a part of me”. Indeed, both statements reveal a deep personal relationship between the musician and their instrument, where music-making is elevated to a deeper level of self-constructed meaning. In this light, participation in youth orchestras is not simply a choice driven by extrinsic and/or intrinsic motivations but informed by a natural expression of selfhood and identity.

Besides individual fulfilment, various participants accounted for a powerful emotional intensity that emerges from collectively making music, resulting into a sense of shared purpose and heightened connection. Riley, when talking about her early experiences with youth orchestras, told me that “in the orchestra, (...) you make something bigger than you yourself will ever be able to do on your own, you know?”. Expanding individual music-making to an immersive collective experience points out to Emile Durkheim’s (1984) concept of collective effervescence, the intensified shared emotional energy that arises through participation in collective rituals (Collins, 2014, p. 299). Although originally theorised around religious life, Durkheim’s theory applies to the context of youth orchestras, as shared commitments to formal codes of conduct and collective music-making elevate the self to a collective experience. When she discusses youth orchestras’ concerts, Elena mentions,

> I love my concert black and I love seeing everyone dressed all nicely, and having their little etiquette, OK, we sit down and then we stand up when the conductor’s here and then we bow and, I love this. For me it's a ritual. And I love that it's a ritual.

Elena’s words ascribe a new light to the existing etiquette in classical music concerts, suggesting that the formalities musicians need to follow have the ability to create a sense of a shared ritual.

In this section, I have underlined how intrinsic motivation is central in youth orchestra participation. Such spaces do not only foster artistic growth and career development, but also passion, identity and collective belonging. This duality points to Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory and how pleasure interferes with strategic capital accumulation (Bull, 2019, pp. 80-81), revealing a much more complex interplay. Although career-driven aspirations are indeed entrenched in young musicians’ decision-making, the pleasures and passions from playing, self-

expression through music and a sense of belonging through collective performance reveal a deeper dedication to a "labour of love" (Menger, 2006, pp. 776-777) and to the emotional rewards music has to offer (Bull, 2019, p. 179; Collins, 2014, p. 299; Scharff, 2017, pp. 22, 141; Yoshihara, 2008, p. 223).

4.1.3. Returning for More: Experience as Motivation

"I think I just wanted to play in an orchestra again." – Eleonora

Throughout all interviews, it quickly became apparent that apart from extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, part of their desire for joining NJO was shaped by the positive experiences attained through previous involvement with youth orchestras. Prior emotional, artistic and social rewards acted both as justifications for past participation, and motivations to return. This illustrates a reflexive motivational loop, where the outcomes become the motivations, complicating any linear distinctions between incentive and reward.

A key factor that drew many participants back is the educational character of youth orchestras. Defining such orchestras as intensive learning environments, young musicians highlighted an array of skills acquired, varying from the specifics of orchestral playing to professional behaviour. "They teach you work ethic, they teach you how to be an orchestra musician", Elena explains, while Eleonora mentions how being a member of a youth orchestra has "definitely made me grow as a musician". Through working with acclaimed conductors, demanding repertoire and due to the excellency expectations, prestigious youth orchestras like NJO provide high-level training for their members. In a highly competitive labour environment like the symphonic orchestra professional one, such training serves as a gateway to securing a job in the future, presenting members with strong incentive to return.

Beyond skill-building and career-orientated gains, most participants accounted for emotional rewards. Getting accepted in NJO, already described as prestigious and selective, acts as a form of validation of one's self-worth. Elena, when discussing her involvement with the orchestra, mentions how

> being in those youth orchestras and seeing those amazing players around me, I sort of appreciate myself a bit more and say, hey, you know what, to be grouped with these amazing individuals, I should be worth something too. No, like this is not a choice by luck, I auditioned and I'm here because I deserve to be here. So that is one that really helped my self-confidence too.

Being part of a renowned ensemble and surrounded by talented young musicians, not only generates self-confidence, but also gives purpose to music-making and reasons to persevere, especially in this highly competitive world. In other words, participation in youth orchestras becomes an environment for self-realisation (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2013, p. 144). Blake, who completed five projects with NJO, argues how,

> I think since I was a part of this orchestra, I also got more comfortable with myself. Because (...) sometimes you need a win in order to make you believe, okay, I am good, actually. I'm doing good. It's not only rejections. (...) We need it sometimes. Something to feel like, okay, nice, I'm keeping up.

Nonetheless, self-confidence is not standing alone amongst the emotional rewards. All twelve respondents accounted for feelings of joy, excitement and creative fulfilment derived from youth orchestra participation. Those experienced emotional reactions to collective music-making served as main takeaways and incentives to return, verifying young musicians' passion and love for music. When I asked Sam, who is now over the age limit for youth orchestras and already working professionally in the field, if he would go back to a non-paying youth orchestra, he responded,

> Absolutely. Because especially now that I cannot do that anymore because of my age, I know how special it is and that you probably are not going to experience it again, so if I could do it, I would absolutely do it again.

Reflecting on the increased value of those special experiences and cherished memories, Sam underscores that motivation for participation moves beyond monetary gains.

Finally, next to personal emotional reactions, many participants spoke of social rewards. Apart from collective performance and networking discussed in previous sections, youth orchestra projects were highlighted for meeting new people and fostering strong social bonds between the members. Since such projects and tours often involve long hours of rehearsing, staying in shared accommodation spaces and spending an extended period of time together, the members develop feelings of social belonging, emotional safety, and a sense of community. When discussing her experiences with youth orchestras throughout her journey, 22-year-old violinist, Eleonora shares, "I just think it's such a good place to grow up in. It's just really comforting and safe, in that sense." One unique element of national youth orchestras, and especially multinational youth orchestras, like NJO, is that they bring musicians with different cultural backgrounds together, facilitating a common way of communication through music. Sam explains,

> especially in JONDE, also in NJO, (...) you meet people from all parts of Spain that we are kind of a huge country with different cultures, different points of view. And then you mix all of them together to make the same kind of music. So then you also kind of end up understanding other people's points of view, and they understand your point of view (...). And that makes it kind of easy to then communicate.

In this way, youth orchestras become spaces of social belonging, where strong personal bonds are formed and sustained and therefore a "community" is formed (Bull, 2019, p. 170). These connections foster emotionally meaningful ties to the ensemble itself, and together with feelings of fulfilment through personal talent, skill development and self-realisation, they encourage members to return.

In this chapter, I presented that youth orchestra participation is driven by a dynamic interplay of strategic aspirations, intrinsic fulfilment and the emotional and social rewards of music-making, tied to self-expression, identity and a sense of community. My findings support previous discussions on "self-realisation", "hope labour", "labour of love" and "community"

formation through collective music-making (Bull, 2019; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2013; Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013 in Scharff, 2017; Menger, 2006), and expand them to the context of youth orchestras. By showing how the promise of future employment, self-realisation, emotional intensity and social connection are reinforced within youth orchestras, I underline young musicians' commitment, even in the absence of monetary compensation. In the next chapter, I explore how my participants' subjectivities reflect broader systemic structures, and narrate youth orchestras' positionality within the classical music ecosystem.

4.2. Systemic Reflections: Youth Orchestras in the Classical Music Ecosystem

Youth orchestras do not operate in isolation. Embedded in the classical music ecosystem, they often mirror its structural dynamics. Throughout the data collection and analysis processes, one of the main concerns was to understand what the participants' nuanced perspectives and motivations reveal about the field, and how the field informs their subjectivities and decisions. Theory portrays a classical music field characterised by intersected inequalities, precariousness and institutional conservatism (see chapter 2.2). Confirming this image, the respondents account for implicit and explicit exclusions based on class, race, gender and geography, despite the alleged meritocracy. They illustrate a field that is still reproducing etiquette, elitism and tradition through institutionalisation, highlighting its deep roots in imperialism and white male supremacy, from how women must be dressed when performing to comments from teachers, such as "conduct with more testosterone" and "you're Asian, you are programmed to be a bit more robotic when you're playing". Underscoring the precarious character of the classical music profession and supporting the scholarship on these topics, the interviewees refer to a scarcity of secure jobs, oversaturation of applicants and widespread underpayment, especially for newcomers, students and young musicians, as well as to the instability of the gig economy. Good payment often comes with artistically undermining performances, while the artistically inspiring and fulfilling ones are unfairly remunerated, revealing tensions between artistic integrity and market driven realities.

In what follows, I explore youth orchestras' position in this ecosystem, and how they operate as institutionalised spaces that both reflect and reproduce the intricacies of the classical music sector. First, I consider their function as gatekeeping institutions, determining access to the profession through their educational role and network. Then, I discuss the influence of funding

and audience in their function, and finally, I explore the routinisation of music-making when professionalised, and how youth orchestras interact with this phenomenon.

4.2.1. Gatekeepers, Networks and "Being in the System"

In chapter 4.1 I underlined the educational significance of youth orchestras, and their role as gateways into the classical music profession. Youth orchestras, like NJO, do not merely offer artistic development or orchestra practise. As educational institutions next to conservatories and music schools, they facilitate the transition of young musicians to professional life, within the field's "institutional ecology" (Bull, 2019, pp. 27-28, 178). When I asked Finn what the role of youth orchestras is in relation to the field and labour market, he responded, "it prepares you in a way to play in a professional orchestra. It simulates that very well." That response left me wondering, is that not the conservatory's job, to serve as gateways to professional life? The respondents mentioned that some conservatories do not have an orchestra to begin with, while others that do, are not taken seriously. Mary describes conservatory orchestras in comparison to youth orchestras and holds that:

> **Mary**: It is not the same.
> **Me**: Why not?
> **Mary**: Because everyone is doing it like it is a chore. And there is not the same care and eagerness to it. They don't care if they are absent or not. Even if it has some effect on their exam, but not really at the end. Because it is not as serious.

Evidently, youth orchestras step up, where formal educational institutions like conservatories and music schools fail, by filling the gap between student and professional life in symphonic orchestras. Apart from technical musical training, they socialise young musicians into informal behavioural codes and hierarchical structures of the field, transmitting middle-class values, such as "self-control and willingness to work with authority", as in with renowned conductors, and foster "a cultural technology for forming a middle-class self", similarly to other spaces of classical music education (Bull, 2019, p. 175). As I stressed in section 4.1.1, extensive orchestral training and opportunities to perform with different conductors and in different halls, are

frequently a prerequisite for future employment. Consequently, youth orchestras not only supplement formal education, but also reproduce embedded classed hierarchies and values, echoing class-based boundaries through exclusion and perceived hegemony.

Apart from musical and orchestral training, youth orchestras offer exposure to the people who matter in the field. Youth orchestras, through collaborating with acclaimed professionals, position their members in proximity to conductors, tutors, musicians from prestigious orchestras and bookers who have the ability of influencing their careers. Dylan mentions how,

> **Dylan:** If you want to be in this circle, you need to be known. You need to be known and you need them (...) to hear you.
>
> **Me:** And who is them?
>
> **Dylan:** The professional, like the soloists from the orchestras, because they decide who the orchestra is calling to come for a replacement.
>
> **Me:** You mean the principal flutist, for example?
>
> **Dylan:** Yes. You need to know the principals and you need to be heard by the principals. That's the most common way. I mean, for me, it's the only way.

With his statement, Dylan describes the intricate power hierarchies that exist inside professional orchestras. The principal players not only have control over decisions about their respective sections, but also over who has access to them, and by extension to the profession itself. Thus, being in that network seems necessary for success in the field. In this context, youth orchestras operate not only as musical institutions, but as networking hubs, pointing to discussions on the crucial role of exclusive networks for granting and sustaining a career in the creative industries in general (Eikhof & Warhurst, 2013, p. 7-8) , and in the classical music field in particular (Scharff, 2017, p. 60). Especially NJO with its professional programme, which hires current and older members of the orchestra for paid performances, offers access to closed circuits of professionals of the industry on top of monetary remuneration. Elena, when discussing this programme, mentioned how,

> This is paid. This is for more seasoned, quote-on-quote, NJO members or old members and these are paid gigs, and you get to meet people from the industry. You get to get have more connections from producers, managers or what not, production assistants, you name it. And yes, you do get your gigs, you get your money. This is great, but you also make connections from people in the industry through those gigs.

The combination of orchestral training and access to exclusive networks positions youth orchestras as powerful gatekeeping institutions within the classical music field. Participation in such ensembles, particularly prestigious and selective ones, including national youth orchestras such as NJO and JONDE, often promises better future career opportunities, and requires pre-existing technical competence. Serving as gatekeepers, those orchestras influence who gains access and finds success in the competitive classical music labour market. Importantly, this gatekeeping is not always transparent. Access to youth orchestra participation often depends on the musician's ability to afford unpaid labour, investments on better instruments and training, or study at particular conservatories where audition notices circulate. Participants account for long periods of rehearsing for NJO projects, which require flexibility and availability. Consequently, participation is more feasible for those who are unemployed. When discussing participating in NJO while working, Blake mentions how,

> when I started working and doing projects at the same time, it was hard. Because I knew I would go there (...) in the middle of January, and then February, I would have to work more in order to cover the money that I would miss then. So it was like my holiday time, let's call it. Because I knew that after that I would have to work more.

Indeed, those already within supportive social networks and privileged social and financial environments are more likely to benefit (Bull, 2019, p. 62). Thus, youth orchestras, as powerful gatekeeping institutions, do not prepare musicians for the profession alone, but pre-select who gets to imagine themselves as viable professionals, reproducing social inequalities. Following Bourdieusian (1986) terms, access to prestigious youth orchestras requires pre-

existing social and financial capital, reserving the accumulation of symbolic and institutionalised cultural capital for those from privileged backgrounds, reinforcing existing hierarchies and the exclusionary character of classical music (Bull, 2019; Kolbe, 2024). In other words, youth orchestras reflect the unfair systemic structures of the classical music field, and in return reward the privileged and reproduce middle-class values.

4.2.2. From Elitism to Inclusion: Access, Audience and Inequality

While youth orchestras may act as gateways to the profession, their capacity to do so is closely tied to their resources. As cultural institutions, they are heavily dependent on external funding in order to be sustainable. The availability or lack of funding holds a central role in shaping the quality, offered opportunities and legitimacy of youth orchestras. Pointing out to Eastburn's (2018, p. 144-145) discussions on how funding affects established institutions, the participants' accounts reveal that funding becomes a prerequisite for sustaining youth orchestras' symbolic value and legitimacy, as well as their position as powerful gatekeeping institutions.

In such policy climates, audience engagement becomes both a challenge and a necessity. Discourse from audience and cultural consumption studies presents a reality where classical music halls are usually attended by certain demographics in the UK, US and Western Europe, usually white, middle-class and older people (Crawford et al., 2014, p. 485). At the same time, statistics on cultural participation in the Netherlands demonstrate a decline in classical music concert attendance in recent years, alongside significantly lower attendance rates when compared to popular music performances (CBS, 2024). Within this environment, multiple interviewees spoke for the significance of audiences for the sustainability of the field. Raising concerns about the lack of broader audience engagement, which could easily influence the future of classical music, they argue that audience attendance is interconnected to funding. When I asked Eleonora what she thinks should change in the structure of the field, she mentioned,

> definitely, the way that it gets funded by the state is a problem. Because the idea behind that is that there is less interest in it, but that also comes from the cuts. It's just a vicious cycle. Like, if there's gonna be more cuts, people are gonna have less money, they can't advertise as much, so they can reach less people.

Indeed, increased audience interest in a cultural organisation goes hand in hand with its attractiveness to subsidies and funding applications, however, “audience-building efforts can just as readily be efforts requiring additional revenue, as they can be generators of revenue” (Ostrower, 2023, p. 30).

Understanding this circular relationship between funding and audiences, the respondents highlight a necessity to reach broader audiences, in an attempt to ensure the viability of classical music in general, and of the profession by extension. With the main goal being attracting younger audiences amongst most interviews, the participants called for a need for more affordable ticket pricing, new and not overplayed symphonic repertoire, and most importantly, a need for negating the remains of etiquette and elitism in the classical music halls. Strict codes of conduct, informally accepted by all parties and intensely condescending looks when those are not followed, maintain classical music’s exclusionary character, and reproduce middle-class values, including self-control and hard work (Kolb, 2000 and Small, 1998 in Crawford et al., 2014, p. 485). As a result, the acceptance of certain behaviours as “appropriate” (Crawford et al., 2014, p. 491) creates barriers in terms of accessibility and welcoming spaces for broader audiences. Classical music concerts seem intimidating, turning people outside the bubble away. Eleonora highlights,

> I feel that people find it uncomfortable, the idea of going to a classical concert. Like it's something that scares them, (...) [asking], what do I wear? It's like, what do you mean, what do they wear? It doesn't matter and that's me, I believe that everybody is welcome.

Even though formal institutions, like professional orchestras, have been trying to move beyond such restrictions and stereotypes, the respondents argue that there is still plenty to be done. In addition to recognising institutional responsibility for audience engagement, participants also expressed a perceived personal obligation to attract audiences. This sense of responsibility supports the entrepreneurial mindsets emerged from the sector’s neoliberal turn, laying the responsibility on the individual, over formal structures of the field (Scharff, 2017, p. 23).

Yet, within this environment still characterised by etiquette and elitism, youth orchestras are described by the respondents as spaces with the ability to overcome such ideas. By integrating new and unknown repertoire in their programming, they offer new experiences, stepping away from the institutionally established "canon repertoire" (Bull, 2019, p. 44; Kolbe, 2024, pp. 61-62), setting an example for professional orchestras to follow. Furthermore, since the musicians themselves are young people, usually in their late teens or twenties, youth orchestras appear more accessible and familiar to younger audiences. In other cases, members invite their social groups to attend their concerts, people that might not have the opportunity to get introduced to this world otherwise. Riley, when talking about the role of youth orchestras in the field, suggests that,

> they get a younger audience to the concert halls, in my experience. Because [the members] invite their friends, of course. Or, for example, my housemates always come to my concerts and it's like, oh it's so cool, I've never been here. So yeah, you kind of get a different audience. I think that's also really valuable.

Finally, Dylan mentions how youth orchestras hold an educational role not only for their members, but also for their audiences. By performing classical repertoire in more accessible formats and settings, such orchestras contribute to cultivating public appreciation for orchestral music, especially amongst younger or less traditionally engaged listeners, sustainably reaching broader audiences.

Indeed, youth orchestras concerts have the potential to attract broader audiences, younger in age, unfamiliar with "patterns of 'appropriate' behaviour" and unsocialised within a "classical music habitus" (Crawford et al., 2014, p. 491), in an attempt to ensure the sustainability of the field. However, little is known about the social and ethnical backgrounds of those audiences. While younger in age, as peer groups, they are likely drawn from similar socio-economic as the members themselves. Given that most of my participants come from white, middle-class backgrounds, these observations ultimately reinforce existing discussions on the classed composition of classical music audiences.

4.2.3. Institutionalisation of Creativity

In previous sections, I explained the educational and gatekeeping role of youth orchestras in preparing youth musicians and regulating access to the classical music labour market (see 4.1.1, 4.2.1). The participants highlighted how participation in such orchestras provides valuable and necessary skills to qualify for future employment in professional orchestras, by creating a "simulation" of a professional orchestra. However, others suggested that not all aspects are the same. Although formal and informal codes of conduct, hierarchies, orchestral playing and behaviour remain similar, the levels of excitement and passion for music-making are noted as very different.

As musicians transition from youth ensembles into formal employment, the nature of music-making itself begins to shift. A recurring theme across the interviews is the perception that upon professionalisation, creativity becomes institutionalised. It takes shape and form in order to fit into the realities and structures of working life, and becomes subject to routine, hierarchies and external expectations. As a result, music-making and orchestra performing becomes a job and loses the joy. Alexis explains how, "[in a] professional orchestra, it's a job. That's it. You go, you play your thing. And I think people after 40 years sitting at the chair, they lose that joy." By becoming "a job", music-making follows a repetitive and specific routine, it is approached in a more serious, professional manner, while the fast pace of rehearsing and performing different programmes increases efficiency, but at the same time creates distance between the musician and the music itself, resulting into some form of alienation. When discussing professional orchestras, 22-year-old violinist, Sarah, who has worked in such environments, underscores how,

> it's much less personal. I mean, in a professional orchestra, you usually just play a programme. You have two rehearsals, three rehearsals, and then you have the concert. The music you play becomes much less personal and very abstract in a way. Which is also one aspect of orchestras that I don't like, that every week you play another programme and... Yeah, it becomes like work, which I don't like to see it in that way.

These accounts contrast Magset et al.'s (2012, p. 157) findings that orchestras involve a "rather soft bureaucratic organisation", and point out to Marx's (1988, p. 74) concept of

alienation of labour. The standardisation of labour, here music-making under specific rehearsal-concert and hierarchical structures, leads to routinisation and distancing from the product itself. In alignment, Micheal L. Siciliano's (2021, p. 120) study on platformised creative labour highlights how creative workers often experience "alienated judgement", when they have little to no control over the creative product. Applying these concepts to symphonic orchestras, and through the accounts of the participants, the repetitive nature of performances, strict hierarchies, including authoritative roles of conductors and principal players, and limited personal expression can lead to alienation where musicians feel disconnected from their work and its outcomes.

Within this reality, youth orchestras distinguish themselves from professional orchestras. Most respondents described youth orchestras as emotionally rich and creatively fulfilling spaces, where music-making becomes "magical" and obtains a deeper meaning. Such environments were often referred to as a "utopia" or a "bubble", or as Sam puts it, "a small gap in your life where you are only living that moment." The intensive rehearsing of the same repertoire for longer periods of time allows members to develop a more personal relationship with the music. Sarah, when talking about her experiences with youth orchestras projects, suggests that,

> in a youth orchestra, you're so busy with those pieces. It's also for a week, but you rehearse from the morning till the evening. And the whole vibe of the orchestra is made by those pieces that you play. So, it becomes much more personal. So, you get really involved in the music.

Together with being extensively involved with the programme, Sam speaks of "a different aura, a different energy, some kind of magic", that comes from discovering and performing pieces for the first time and being emerged in those for sometimes up to three weeks. These accounts illustrate how youth orchestras offer a rare opportunity to experience music-making as meaningful, affectively charged and artistically fulfilling.

Another element about youth orchestras that was highly underscored across the interviews as special and absent in professional settings was the sense of community. Apart from long rehearsals, spending an extended period of time together with other members from day to night, growing closer and having fun, while also collectively creating music, result into an immersive and powerful experience, allowing members to develop personal relationships, not

only with the music, but with other peers too. The respondents explained that during youth orchestra projects, eating, living together and spending time together after the rehearsals, cultivate strong bonds between the members, often long-lasting and deep. Blake discusses her first orchestra project with NJO and mentions that “I made some of my best friends there”. Apart from the personal relationships, these shared conditions foster a sense of community and belonging, and together with collective music-making, they do not only enhance the musical experience, but also reinforce participants’ emotional ties to music itself.

Notably, those strong bonds and community feelings foster solidarity, which acts as a form of resilience against challenging situations, and institutional interventions. Dylan, shares a notable moment during a JONDE tour, when a personal loss coincided with the pressure of performing a challenging solo. In the middle of the tour, the orchestra manager considered replacing him, because supposedly his playing was not up to her standards. Yet, instead of simply accepting a top-down decision, the section stood by him, expressing their trust and wanting him to continue. Dylan’s story underscores the paradox of youth orchestras: although they operate as powerful institutional gatekeepers within the classical music world, they also foster peer-driven solidarity and resilience that challenge the very hierarchies they help uphold.

The accounted differences between youth and professional orchestras signal a broader tension, a struggle between romanticism and realism. Throughout all interviews, the respondents talked with great appreciation about youth orchestras and with great sentiment about the special energy they broadcast. Although their educational and preparational role towards a professional orchestra is highlighted, they are still described as unrealistic or dissimilar to professional orchestras. When talking Sarah about her experience with NJO, she explains,

> to be really honest, I don't think that a youth orchestra really represents what an actual orchestra is about. Because [in a] youth orchestra, you're together for like two weeks or something, like very close. You're there from the morning till evening. But in a professional orchestra, you go to your job in the morning. Then after lunch, you go home and do other things. And with a youth orchestra, (...) it's basically like a utopia, you know? Like another world. You're for two weeks there, spending time with friends, having fun. And then you play because you like. But it's not the

> real world. I think it's just a nice image of what it could be. But I don't think it's the reality of what orchestra actually is.

Defined by passion, connection and meaning, the romanticised image of orchestras is then faced with the realities of the field. In the professional setting, young musicians are compelled to adapt to the constraints of institutionalised music-making. Sam, who already graduated in 2021 and has been freelancing in orchestras since, describes this shift in the approach and experience of performing in orchestras,

> at the beginning, [it] felt very special. But then you start seeing like, OK, these people [don't] feel the same magic that you are feeling or that you used to feel in the youth orchestras. And you start seeing it more as a job. So now it feels (...) more like a job.

Indeed, these reflections expose a broader process of disillusionment. The romanticism of youth orchestras gradually gives way to the pragmatic realities of the profession. The deeply emotional and personal engagement with music that is cultivated in youth orchestras gradually transforms into routinised labour, bound by institutional constraints. These formative encounters, not only serve as drivers for returning to youth orchestras, as I have indicated in chapter 4.1.3, but also as emotional anchors, allowing young musicians to mitigate feelings of detachment as they move towards professional life. When discussing how he experienced the shift from youth to professional orchestras, Sam highlights,

> musically, I think even if you don't feel it later the same way in the professional orchestras, at least for me, when I played a programme that I played before in a youth orchestra, the same magic is still somewhere there. And then you kind of bring it back and then you have some kind of different approach of it. So I think it helps a lot.

In other words, the meaning assigned to music-making during youth orchestras projects stays with musicians for life, serving as an antidote to alienation and institutional constraints of the

profession. Reflecting on the difficult and precarious conditions young musicians face upon entry to the classical music labour market, Mary mentions how,

> and to be honest, since we're on the topic of youth orchestras, many times that I feel like, you know, I should give up. It's not worth it and everything. I have many great memories and moments I realised I love music because of youth orchestras. And I try to remember that.

What Sam and Mary's words reveal is that in reality, youth orchestras act as more than transitional institutions. Love and passion for music, cultivated in such environments, add a foundational sense of purpose and meaning to orchestral music-making–as discussed by Bull (2018; 2019), Scharff (2017) and Yoshihara (2008) in previous sections of this thesis–and is sustained even through the disenchantment of professional life. Thus, youth orchestras do not merely prepare musicians for the profession, but sustain the emotional and creative stakes that make the profession worth pursuing in the first place.

In other words, youth orchestras sit ambivalently within the field structure. Indeed, they serve as key sites for professional development, and by doing so, they reproduce existing classed values, hierarchies and inequalities, as gatekeeper, they regulate the composition of the field (Bull, 2019; Kolbe, 2024). Yet, they seem to also function as alternative spaces, operating outside of the established norms. By providing emotionally fulfilling, artistically enriching and socially meaningful experiences, they counterbalance the routinisation and alienation often reported in professional orchestras, and resist systemic structures. Additionally, these experiences foster a sense of solidarity that operates as a form of resilience. In this way, youth orchestras sustain young musicians' motivation and sense of purpose, that move beyond material gains and return to the music itself. In the next chapter, I build on these findings by turning to the narratives and subjectivities young musicians develop, in response to the complexity of this landscape and in an attempt to shed light on its intricate dynamics.

4.3. Subjectivities in Formation: NJO Members' Narratives

After discussing the motivations for joining youth orchestras and how they are informed by classical music ecosystem structures, this chapter turns to how young musicians themselves

navigate and make sense of it. The narratives of the participants, who have been socialised within formal educational institutions, like youth orchestras, reflect nuanced understandings of how the classical music world and profession function. Thus, exploring their perspectives is essential to answering the research question of this study. By doing so, I provide a deeper analysis, demonstrating that the subjectivities of young musicians are not fixed or isolated, but constantly negotiated in response to lived experiences and perceptions of the tensions and tendencies of the field they inhabit. I begin by unfolding the perceived role of luck in shaping access to opportunities, move to strategies of emotional and professional flexibility in coping with the precarious conditions of the profession, and finally, I discuss how music is connected to identity and meaning.

4.3.1. Making it (or Not): Luck as an Interpretative Frame

"Sometimes you can get really lucky. Sometimes you don't get so lucky." – Luca

Within the competitive and saturated classical music world, where conservatories produce more graduates than the labour market can absorb (Scharff, 2017, p. 23), youth orchestras have a crucial role as stepping stones towards professional careers, as I discussed in previous sections (see 4.2.1). Their powerful position renders them highly popular, resulting into strict and competitive selection processes. However, the interviewees do not view access to or success within youth orchestras as solely merit-based, but rather as "being at the right place at the right time" or "knowing the right person", within a context of luck. Mary speaks of eighty cellists competing for one spot in NJO, and she adds, "It's like 50% level, 50% luck", underscoring that skill alone is not enough. Reflecting on a broader system of the classical music field that appears to contradict ideals of meritocracy, many young musicians mention luck as a tool to rationalise unpredictability, high levels of competitiveness and structural precariousness.

Luck emerges as a coping strategy that allows young musicians to make sense of their position within this environment. Even though there have been efforts for fair evaluation processes, such as the introduction of blind auditions in many professional orchestras (Goldin & Rouse, 2000), the respondents suggest that merit and skill alone cannot grant a successful audition. Eleonora argues how the process of auditioning "doesn't really say a lot about you

actually, if you get accepted or not, or your position. It's really just random.”, while Mary agrees that,

> first of all, if you have a bad day or a good day, which is really important when you have an audition. Second of all, how tired they are in the committee. Then in which order do you play? Do you play first? Do you play last? Both are not good. If you play in the middle, is it after the break or before the break? There are so many things. Maybe your string tunes off in the middle of your audition. They're like, okay, thank you, next.

What Eleonora and Mary account for is the perception that skill and effort is not what gets one a job, but external factors, out of one’s control, are. Rather than believing in a fair system of effort and reward, the participants turn to luck, highlighting how the system has failed to provide equitable career opportunities based on merit.

Apart from being an interpretive tool for the lack of meritocracy, luck allows young musicians to acknowledge and navigate broader forms of inequality, in terms of ethnicity and socio-economic background. Sarah, a Dutch violinist with a mixed ethnocultural background, underlines that early networking is necessary for success in the field. Access to such networks is usually granted through exclusive and prestigious opportunities, such as performing in prestigious festivals or TV shows. However, those opportunities, Sarah argues, are not equally distributed, but reserved for Dutch musicians, who also “look Dutch”. She mentions,

> I think it's quite possible to have a good career here. But you really need to have the correct network from the beginning. You need to be lucky with your... It sounds so rude in a way, but if you're Dutch you have more luck. People ultimately want to promote you more.

What Sarah’s words underline is the utilisation of luck as a coping mechanism to navigate a system that does not always reward talent predictably or transparently, but rather discriminates and favours those who were born in privileged environments.

In this light, luck becomes both an interpretive tool for embedded disparities and a coping mechanism against those, and simultaneously relates to what Scharff (2017, p. 152) calls a "wider process of individualisation of failure", within the context of neoliberalism. Along these lines, young musicians utilise luck as an alternative narrative to success, as reliant on uncontrollable, external factors over personal responsibility (Scharff, 2017, p. 115; Yoshihara, 2008, pp. 152-153), allowing them to navigate the structural constraints of the field.

4.3.2. Coping with Precariousness: Institutionalised Attitudes

Beyond luck, participants mentioned a range of strategies for navigating the classical music field. While its precarious conditions, including financial insecurity, inconsistency and scarcity of opportunities, are widely acknowledged across the interviews and often criticised, they are also normalised as inevitable to pursuing a classical music career, or rationalised through the gains. When discussing his experiences with low or no pay within the field, Finn mentions how

> **Finn:** I'm also at the point where unpaid I take, underpaid I take, well paid of course I take, but I think it's, yeah, it's not great, but it's a part of it.
>
> **Me:** It's a part of the…?
>
> **Finn:** Yeah, the journey and I will still do unpaid work, yes.
>
> **Me:** Why?
>
> **Finn:** For passion projects, a hundred percent, always. And also for connections, if I see it worth it, yes, for sure.

Indeed, what Finn demonstrates is that precariousness is not only considered as a normal aspect of the field, but acceptance of low or no pay is justified by its gains–networking, experience, reputation, or simply for the sake of the music. Nonetheless, this acceptance is not uncritical. Riley mentions, "because I'm a student, I want the experience, of course, of doing gigs and concerts, but I still need to get paid. (...) If it's not well paid, (...) there must be some gain or some fun or anything." Precarious conditions are amplified for students and new entrants to the field, and rationalised through possible rewards. Dylan, when discussing his unpaid participation in youth orchestras throughout his journey, mentions, "I was trying also to improve the level of

the orchestra, that I was playing, (...) every time I try to step up", highlighting that saying yes to unpaid participation is a strategic plan for improvement. In this way, some unpaid or underpaid opportunities are reframed as strategic investments for career advancement, especially at the early stages of one's career, before a certain level and reputation are established. In later stages, though, a shifting threshold for accepting low or no pay opportunities appears. When talking about her experiences with financially unstable performances with her chamber music ensemble, Elena suggests that,

> after a point, it becomes kind of a joke. How many hours of unpaid labour should I give you? I cannot give you more than a certain amount. So yes, I'm gonna say yes to the badly paid or unpaid gig, so we gain some exposure as an ensemble, but I'm not gonna say yes to every single one of them, because I also value my time.

This shift reflects a growing awareness of labour value, but also a changing capacity to afford unpaid work in relation to one's age and professional stage. Highlighting this shift, Blake brings up the example of NJO and why it is targeted towards students, "because after that you're asking for money. And it's normal because you have to survive. Of course, they pay your food, they pay these things, but that's not enough."

As spaces that combine career-oriented networking and emotional fulfilment, and typically target students without pay, youth orchestras not only reflect the field's the precarious conditions, but also shape young musicians' attitudes towards them. Participation is proven necessary for career advancement (see 4.1.1), yet it is not monetarily compensated. Thus, it becomes a formative experience where norms of unpaid work are internalised, precariousness is normalised and rationalised through perceived gains. Simultaneously, by operating through short-term projects and demanding versatility and adaptability, they familiarise young musicians with structures of the field, including project-based labour models, the necessity to stay flexible and combining orchestra performance with other forms of income (Bennett & Hennekam, 2018; Scharff, 2017; Eikhof & Warhust, 2013). In an ecosystem where stable employment is scarce, staying open and flexible to a variety of opportunities, such as teaching, freelancing, cross-border work and DIY projects, a "portfolio career" (Scharff, 2017, p. 21) emerges as both a coping

mechanism and a creative solution against precariousness. Nonetheless, employing a portfolio career is not always a deliberate choice, but forced by the systemic structures and insufficiencies of the field and transmitted through institutions like youth orchestras. Reflecting on the limited orchestra positions, especially for clarinetists, Finn suggests,

> that's why I think deep down I'm so happy with any of the options. It's because I know that it's not certain that there's an orchestral job for me. There's no rainbow with the job at the end. I think maybe even a few years ago, I was happy with any direction that's musically rewarding. And for me, teaching, chamber music and replacement work is all of that level.

Finn's response highlights the structural necessity to diversify. Furthermore, it reveals that young musicians' willingness to accept precarious work depends on music-playing remaining rewarding and creatively fulfilling, underscoring how young musicians are socialised as passion-driven into a "labour of love" (Menger, 2006).

It becomes clear that the subjectivities of young musicians mirror and are informed by broader dynamics of the field. Socialised within youth orchestras, they learn how to endure and strategically accept systemic instability, rationalise precariousness and stay versatile, as long as passion persists (Scharff, 2017, p. 155). These experiences reinforce broader structural conditions in the field, making youth orchestras not just preparatory spaces, but reproducers of precarious norms of the profession.

4.3.3. Beyond Careers: Music as Identity and Meaning

For many of the young musicians that I spoke with, playing music was never simply an aspiration towards a career. As I briefly outlined in previous chapters (see 4.1.2 and 4.1.3), music is described to be an integral part of selfhood and emotional life by most interviewees. Blake describes that the flute is "like my third hand. I'm used to it." Internalised from a young age and rooted in long-standing routines, being an instrumentalist becomes a central part of the young musicians' identities. Given the fact that most respondents started taking lessons between the ages of seven and nine, and the consistent practising, music-making is framed as a natural part of their everyday identity. In other cases, music is defined as the extension of the self, a means

towards life, a way they understand and relate to themselves. Alexis explains that through playing the viola, “I felt I got understood–by myself, through an instrument. I got super motivated from the very first moment of trying an instrument.” And throughout her journey, “I felt in a safe world with music, let's say, like also with the people that surround me. I started understanding myself thanks to music”.

Indeed, both Alexis and Blake highlight an intimate relationship between their identities and music, in alignment with Hesmondhalgh and Baker’s (2013, p. 148-149) discussions on identities within creative labour. Nonetheless, such a relationship comes with a heightened emotional weight tied to both professional success and failure. When discussing her experiences within the classical music world, Eleonora explains,

> it's quite an interesting a space to be in, (...) because it's really personal. It's gonna be quite difficult because you identify your work so much with your own personality. Because being a musician really says something about you, or at least it says something, I think, about me. And I also like that. It's very personal. But then obviously when something doesn't work out, it can be an identity crisis.

In such a competitive and precarious environment, rejection is expected. However, as shown by Scharff (2017, p. 22), when the profession is so closely tied to one’s identity, rejection is not merely a setback, but often triggers self-doubt and questioning of self-worth. This is amplified by the entrepreneurial mindset required to navigate the field’s structural constraints, which results into understanding success as individual responsibility (Scharff, 2017, p. 115; Yoshihara, 2008, pp. 152-153). In that way, pressure to succeed is intensified by this entanglement of personal value, professional validation and neoliberal individualisation. In a field marked by a lack of stable, well-paid opportunities and institutional support, oversaturated streams of young musicians and performance-based replacement cultures, these pressures are heightened and contribute to emotional costs. The participants accounted for burnouts, high levels of anxiety, one needs a “very tough skin” to endure, as Mary argues.

Understanding this intricate entanglement, some participants stressed a necessity to separate these realities, in order to navigate the emotional costs of precariousness in classical music. Alexis, originally from Spain, but studying in the Netherlands, underscores,

> the Netherlands taught me that nothing is personal. (...) If I tell you this doesn't sound good, it's not because I think you're a bad person or a bad instrumentalist. It's just that this is not sounding good and that's it.

Separating the craft from the identity is a strategy that allows young musicians to persist through criticism and rejection and keep going, yet not easy to sustain. Crucially, this acquired detachment also links to the emotional distance and sense of alienation many described in professional orchestral environments (see 4.2.3). Accordingly, Mary mentions that "music, for my life, is a tool, not the goal of it." While she previously acknowledged the personal meaning of music as a form of resilience, she does not see music as an ultimate life goal. In her view, only those with social and financial privileges can afford such attitudes, "because you're not concerned with things. So you can just be an artist and create. And just create and only care for that creation." Oblivious to the struggles of the field, those from privileged backgrounds can afford to focus on their craft, free from concerns about financial survival. Thus, the ability to emotionally detach becomes another form of resilience against a highly competitive environment where privilege is rewarded, and financial stability needs to be strived for.

On the other hand, this identity-based and deeply personal relationship with music also drives perseverance despite the field's precarious conditions. As discussed elsewhere, music-making gains personal meaning and gives structure and purpose, even when external rewards are uncertain. Being emotionally rich and immersive environments, youth orchestras cultivate such meanings. In that sense, they equip their members with purpose and intrinsic value in their perceptions of music-making, in the face of precarious work and broader challenges of the field. In a more critical light, though, youth orchestras reproduce, and even generate the idea that precarious labour is acceptable, as long as it is musically meaningful. This perspective is reflected in multiple respondents' accounts, and highlighted by Sam, who talks about youth orchestra projects and explains,

> you don't do this kind of projects for money. Even if JONDE (...) wouldn't have paid me any money, I would have done it. Absolutely. (...) Honestly, I kind of forgot that they were paying me until now that you told me.

It is evident from Sam's account that the perceived intrinsic value of music making within youth orchestras matters more to their participants, than monetary compensation, which is at times even irrelevant to their decisions. In this way, passion becomes both a source of resilience and a mechanism through which precariousness is normalised, blurring the line between genuine art for art's sake, and structural exploitation, as well as self-exploitation (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2013, p. 142).

In this final chapter, I have explored how young musicians make sense of their journeys within the classical music field. Their negotiations reveal how the field's precarious conditions are internalised and rationalised, and perpetuated by formal institutions. I have demonstrated that classical music is not merely a career path, but a central part of one's identity and emotional life, fostering opportunities for self-realisation, meaning and perseverance, but simultaneously heightening the emotional impact of failure and rejection (Hesmondalgh & Baker, 2013; Scharff, 2017). Youth orchestras reinforce a "labour of love" ethos (Menger, 2006), but also reproduce the field's instability as a norm. In doing so, they highlight the double-sided role of music's meaning: while it motivates musicians to endure precariousness, it legitimises systemic exploitation and social disparities through formal and informal processes.

5. Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore the motivations behind young and aspiring musicians' unpaid participation in youth orchestras. Building on discourses on creative labour and career subjectivities in the creative industries, particularly within the classical music field, it examined how young musicians interpret, internalise and navigate the structures of the field, through the lens of youth orchestra participation. Drawing on qualitative data from twelve thematically analysed semi-structured interviews with current or former members of the Nationaal Jeugdorkest (NJO), the findings reveal a dynamic interplay of extrinsic and intrinsic motivations beyond remuneration. Driven by strategic aspirations, young musicians seek orchestral training, familiarity with the profession and exposure to exclusive networks, in hopes for access to the

profession. This way, unpaid labour is reinterpreted as “hope labour” (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). In other words, unpaid labour is justified as an investment in long-term professional gains, and youth orchestras as understood as essential stepping stones towards a saturated and precarious labour market. Alongside career-driven motivations, the data reveals significant intrinsic motivations, rooted in emotional fulfilment and artistic passion. For many, music-making is not merely a career goal but a central component of identity and meaning, and an opportunity to connect with peers. Experienced emotional and social rewards from past youth orchestra participation, such as validation of self-worth and talent, joy and a ritualistic sense of belonging, further justify unpaid participation and motivate young musicians to return.

These motivations reveal a perceived value attributed to youth orchestra participation, which emphasises their crucial position within the classical music ecosystem, in relation to broader structural conditions. My analysis demonstrates that youth orchestras occupy an ambivalent position. On one hand, they operate as powerful gatekeeping institutions, regulating access and success, while reproducing structural inequalities and precariousness, by keeping participation unpaid and benefitting those with pre-existing economic and social capital. By transmitting silent expressions of middle-class values, they mask elitism and exclusion as meritocracy and reinforce internalised rationalisations of precarious labour through expected gains. On the other hand, youth orchestras operate outside of the norms of the field. By offering an artistic and emotional “utopia”, they assign meaning and purpose to music-making, and cultivate forms of resilience and solidarity that serve as antidotes to the routinisation and alienation experienced in professional orchestra settings. Thus, while embedded within systemic structures they help reproduce, youth orchestras also foster alternative negotiations.

Finally, by centering young musicians’ narratives on youth orchestra participation, I was able to extract valuable insights about the classical music ecosystem, reflected on the intricate ways the participants make sense of and navigate it. The findings suggest that the field’s unpredictability, high competitiveness and perceived lack of meritocracy are rationalised and understood as out of one’s control, through the concept of luck. Along these lines, luck also becomes a coping mechanism against systemic inequalities that favour certain social and racial backgrounds. Precariousness, native to the field of classical music, is widely acknowledged, yet, unfair pay gaps, instability and unpredictability are often normalised and justified through artistic, social and professional rewards. Ultimately, youth orchestras foster deep emotional

investments, which drive dedication, but also blur the line between "art for art's sake" and structural self-exploitation (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2013; Menger, 2006).

By situating youth orchestras within larger structural tensions, my findings contribute to broader sociological debates on the complexities of the classical music ecosystem, inequalities within creative labour and precarious work. Building on existing discussions on the complex organisation of the classical music ecosystem (Bull, 2019; Dromey & Haferkorn, 2018; Kolbe, 2024; Scharff, 2017), this study offers a detailed analysis and brings underresearched youth orchestras to the fore. While prior research has mapped the field's elitist and gatekeeping mechanisms, it mainly focused on conservatories and other formal institutions. In expanding Bull's (2019) and Scharff's (2017) works beyond the UK and Germany into the context of the Netherlands, and positioning youth orchestras as crucial stakeholders, this thesis illustrates how institutional dominance is reproduced, expanded to youth orchestras, but is simultaneously complicated by their ambivalent role.

Secondly, this study contributes to discourses on structural inequalities in classical music, and in creative work more broadly. Although gendered and racialised inequalities could not be explored further due to my sample's limitations, my analysis supports discussions by Bull (2019), Gill (2002) and Yoshihara (2008), on how embedded social inequalities persist through formal and informal expressions. Supporting Scharff's (2017) study on inequality and subjectivity in classical music, such inequalities are reinforced by precarious working conditions, internalised by workers at the very start of their career trajectories and legitimised through artistic and emotional rewards. The narrations of young musicians present individualised emotional and strategic coping mechanisms and navigation strategies of silent resilience, that align with critiques of neoliberal individualisation in cultural work (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2013; McRobbie, 2016; Yoshihara, 2008), as through self-realisation processes and entrepreneurial mindsets, cultural workers become vulnerable to self-exploitation. Reflecting on broader creative labour debates, this thesis builds on Eikhof and Warhust's (2013) argument that the organisation of creative labour reproduces inequalities and presents how class privilege remains determinant of access to unpaid, but symbolically valuable opportunities. In short, it demonstrates how the system rewards the privileged, who acquire the capital to access exclusive networks and unpaid "internships".

Finally, this thesis contributes to debates on precarious work, by demonstrating how unpaid and insecure forms of employment are normalised by formal structures and internalised by workers. Underlining creative labour's unique roots in passion and identity, precariousness is accepted and endured, as long as emotional fulfilment can be extracted, supporting Hesmondhalgh and Baker's (2013) discussions on self-realisation and identity. Passion and emotional fulfilment are considered to negate negative outcomes of precarious work, diverting attention from systemic and institutional responsibility, and thus reinforcing neoliberal labour ideologies that attribute responsibility solely to the individual. Accepting precariousness as "part of it", or learning to navigate it through coping mechanisms, such as a "wilful ignorance", only perpetuates its existence. Lastly, since precarious work is inherently linked to embedded inequalities and the dominance of certain structures (Eikhof & Warhurst, 2013; Kolbe, 2024; Scharff, 2017), acceptance, internalisation and rationalisation of precariousness only reproduces inequalities, resulting into a perpetual cycle.

Beyond its contributions, this thesis came across certain limitations. Notably, even though the snowball sampling method enabled access to an exclusive network, it resulted into a group with similar characteristics: mainly white, European and middle-class. Indeed, the composition of the sample supports the middle-class and white Eurocentric hegemony reported in the field (Bull, 2019; Kolbe, 2024; Scharff, 2017; Yang, 2007), but also reinforced the silencing of marginalised voices. Additionally, by drawing on accounts from NJO's members, the study reflects perspectives within a particular institutional and national context. Although the participants' early socialisation took place in a variety of contexts (Netherlands, Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Portugal, Australia, UK), their narratives focused primarily on the Dutch context, where NJO is situated. Their accounts did show differences between contexts, but the case study nature of this project did not allow for delving deeper into them, restricting my findings' generalisability to different contexts.

The reliance on retrospective interviews also presented limitations. While the participants provided rich and reflective accounts, data may be influenced by response bias, and a will to stay "politically correct" or to say "the right thing"[8]. Furthermore, despite the theoretical centrality of intersectionality, and in alignment with Scharff (2017, p. 195), my participants were less eager to

[8] Participants often said "don't get me wrong", or placed contradicting disclaimers before sharing an opinion.

discuss racial and gendered inequalities, limiting the study's scope to mainly class inequalities. Finally, and importantly, I am not neglecting my own positionality as part of the limitations. As discussed in chapter 3.5, although I strived to remain reflexive throughout the research processes, I acknowledge a level of confirmation and researcher's bias, the influence of my middle-class, white and female background, and proximity to the field in the collection and interpretation of data, theoretical discussions and analyses.

Future research should expand my findings and examine their reliability and generalisability by exploring national youth orchestras of different countries and contexts. Incorporating different analytical methodologies would further expand my arguments. Discourse analysis could potentially shed light on silenced narratives on gender and race inequalities, comparative research across countries and institutions could draw better informed conclusions on the systemic dynamics of different contexts, and intersectional analysis could strengthen my findings by offering a more nuanced understanding of how race, gender and class interact to directly or indirectly shape musicians' trajectories and subjectivities.

Beyond academia, this thesis has broader implications for cultural institutions, educators and policymakers. As I, together with a plethora of scholars before me, have underlined, intersected inequality and precariousness in creative working ecosystems are intertwined, within a very complex interplay of different systemic structures and dynamics, often inherently passed down by long-standing traditions. For this reason, recent attempts for change, like the introduction of blind auditions and NJO's professional programmes, might improve formal expressions of inequality and precariousness, yet, the rigid structural dynamics of the field reproduce values of classed and cultural hegemony, rendering real change difficult. Deeper and structural change needs to be implemented against the hidden and silenced expressions of inequality and precariousness. Having demonstrated the crucial roles of formal institutions, I underscore the necessity of such institutions, including youth orchestras, to understand their power and responsibility, and to take action towards new curricula, equal access and the transmission of values and behavioural conducts that prioritise inclusivity and diversity.

References

Abbing, H. (2002). *Why are artists poor? The exceptional economy of the arts* (pp. 78–102). Amsterdam University Press. http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctt45kdz4.7

Alper, N. O., & Wassall, G. H. (2006). Artists' careers and their labor markets. In V. A. Ginsburgh & D. Throsby (Eds.), *Handbook of the economics of art and culture* (Vol. 1, pp. 813–864). Elsevier. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1574-0676(06)01023-4

Arthur, M. B., & Rousseau, D. M. (Eds.). (2001). *The boundaryless career: A new employment principle for a new organizational era*. Oxford University Press.

Auditie & musici. (n.d.). NJO. Retrieved December 11, 2024, from https://www.njo.nl/auditie-en-musici/auditie-musici

Bennett, A. (2018). Conceptualising the relationship between youth, music and DIY careers: A critical overview. *Cultural Sociology, 12*(2), 140–155.

Bennett, D., & Hennekam, S. (2018). Lifespan perspective theory and (classical) musicians' careers. In C. Dromey & J. Haferkorn (Eds.), *The classical music industry* (pp. 112–125). Routledge. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315471099-9

Blair, H. (2009). Active networking: Action, social structure and the process of networking. In A. McKinlay & C. Smith (Eds.), *Creative labour: Working in the creative industries* (pp. 116–134). Palgrave Macmillan.

Bourdieu, P. (1985). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* (R. Nice, Trans.; T. Bennett, Intro.). Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood Press.

Brook, O., O'Brien, D., & Taylor, M. (2020). "There's no way that you get paid to do the arts": Unpaid labour across the cultural and creative life course. *Sociological Research Online, 25*(4), 571–588. https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780419895291

Bull, A. (2018). Uncertain capital: Class, gender, and the "imagined futures" of young classical musicians. In C. Dromey & J. Haferkorn (Eds.), *The classical music industry* (pp. 79–95). Routledge.

Bull, A. (2019). *Class, control, and classical music*. Oxford University Press.

Bull, A., Scharff, C., & Nooshin, L. (Eds.). (2023). *Voices for change in the classical music profession: New ideas for tackling inequalities and exclusions*. Oxford University Press.

CBS. (2024). *How many people attend concerts and performances?* The Netherlands in Numbers 2024. https://longreads.cbs.nl/the-netherlands-in-numbers-2024/how-many-people-attend-concerts-and-performances/

Christopherson, S. (2009). Working in the creative economy: Risk, adaptation, and the persistence of exclusionary networks. In A. McKinlay & C. Smith (Eds.), *Creative labour: Working in the creative industries* (pp. 72–90). Palgrave Macmillan.

Collins, R. (2014). Interaction ritual chains and collective effervescence. In C. von Scheve & M. Salmela (Eds.), *Collective emotions* (pp. 299–311). Oxford University Press.

Coulson, S. (2012). Collaborating in a competitive world: Musicians' working lives and understandings of entrepreneurship. *Work, Employment and Society, 26*(2), 246–261. https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017011432919

Crawford, G., Gosling, V., Bagnall, G., & Light, B. (2014). An orchestral audience: Classical music and continued patterns of distinction. *Cultural Sociology, 8*(4), 483–500. https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975514541862

Dromey, C., & Haferkorn, J. (Eds.). (2018). *The classical music industry*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315471099

Durkheim, E. (1984). Chapter 3. In *The elementary forms of religious life* (pp. 177–203). Free Press. (Original work published 1912)

Eikhof, D. R., & Haunschild, A. (2007). For art's sake! Artistic and economic logics in creative production. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 28*(5), 523–538. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.462

Eikhof, D. R., & Warhurst, C. (2013). The promised land? Why social inequalities are systemic in the creative industries. *Employee Relations, 35*(5), 495–508. https://doi.org/10.1108/ER-08-2012-0061

Finkel, R., Jones, D., Sang, K., & Stoyanova Russell, D. (2017). Diversifying the creative: Creative work, creative industries, creative identities. *Organization, 24*(3), 281–288. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508417690167

Florida, R. (2004). *The rise of the creative class*. Basic Books.

Goldin, C., & Rouse, C. (2000). Orchestrating impartiality: The impact of "blind" auditions on female musicians. *American Economic Review, 90*(4), 715–741.

Hamilton, A. (2009). Scruton's philosophy of culture: Elitism, populism, and classic art. *The British Journal of Aesthetics, 49*(4), 389–404. https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayp035

Hannay, A. H. (1954). The concept of art for art's sake. *Philosophy, 29*(108), 44–53. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819100022129

Haraway, D. (2013). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. In *Women, science, and technology* (pp. 455–472). Routledge.

Harding, S. G. (1986). *The science question in feminism*. Cornell University Press.

Hesmondhalgh, D., & Baker, S. (2013). *Creative labour: Media work in three cultural industries*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203855881

Hickson, S. (2017). Patronage of the arts. *Oxford Bibliographies in Renaissance and Reformation*. https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780195399301-0358

Home - NJO. (n.d.). Www.njo.nl. Retrieved June 4, 2025, from https://www.njo.nl/english

Home. (n.d.). *Muziekzomer Gelderland*. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from https://muziekzomer.nl/

Howkins, J. (2001). *The creative economy*. Penguin.

Jonde. (n.d.). Retrieved May 6, 2025, from https://jonde.inaem.gob.es/

Kolbe, K. (2024). *The sound of difference: Race, class and the politics of 'diversity' in classical music*. Manchester University Press.

Kuehn, K., & Corrigan, T. F. (2013). Hope labor: The role of employment prospects in online social production. *The Political Economy of Communication, 1*(1), 9–25.

Lazzarato, M. (1996). Immaterial labor. In *Radical thought in Italy: A potential politics* (pp. 133–147).

Mangset, P., Kleppe, B., & Røyseng, S. (2012). Artists in an iron cage? Artists' work in performing arts institutions. *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society, 42*(4), 156–175. https://doi.org/10.1080/10632921.2012.727773

Marx, K., Engels, F., & Milligan, M. (1988). *The economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*. Prometheus.

McGuigan, J. (2014). Creative labour, cultural work and individualisation. In *Creativity and cultural policy* (pp. 93–105). Routledge.

McGuigan, J. (2016). *Neoliberal culture*. Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137466464

McRobbie, A. (2016). *Be creative: Making a living in the new culture industries*. Polity.

Menger, P. (2006). Artistic labor markets: Contingent work, excess supply and occupational risk management. In V. A. Ginsburgh & D. Throsby (Eds.), *Handbook of the economics of art and culture* (Vol. 1, pp. 765–811). Elsevier. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1574-0676(06)01022-2

Miller, D. L. (2016). Gender and the artist archetype: Understanding gender inequality in artistic careers. *Sociology Compass, 10*(2), 119–131.

Morgan, G., & Nelligan, P. (2018). *The creativity hoax: Precarious work in the gig economy*. Anthem Press.

Nomnian, S. (2009). Advantages and disadvantages of using diaries and semi-structured interviews in a case study examining a Thai ESL student's perceptions on British culture. *rEFLections, 12*, 53–66. https://doi.org/10.61508/refl.v12i0.114247

NJO, NJON. (2023, August 24). *Audition and participation regulations for National Youth Orchestra of the Netherlands projects*. Nationaal Jeugdorkest. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from https://www.njo.nl/documenten/00000047.pdf

O'Brien, D., Laurison, D., Miles, A., & Friedman, S. (2016). Are the creative industries meritocratic? An analysis of the 2014 British Labour Force Survey. *Cultural Trends, 25*(2), 116–131.

Orchestra. (n.d.). NJO. Retrieved December 13, 2024, from https://www.njo.nl/english/orchestra/orchestra

Orchestras in Greece. (n.d.). *Greek Orchestras & Opera Houses*. Musicalchairs. Retrieved June 4, 2025, from https://www.musicalchairs.info/greece/orchestras

Ostrower, F. (2023). *In search of the magic bullet: Results from the Building Audiences for Sustainability Initiative*. The University of Texas at Austin. https://doi.org/10.59656/A-AD7847.001

Schediwy, L., Bhansing, P. V., & Loots, E. (2018). Young musicians' career identities: Do bohemian and entrepreneurial career identities compete or cohere? *Creative Industries Journal, 11*(2), 174–196. https://doi.org/10.1080/17510694.2018.1489197

Scharff, C. (2017). *Gender, subjectivity, and cultural work: The classical music profession*. Routledge.

Scharff, C. (2018). Inequalities in the classical music industry: The role of subjectivity in constructions of the "ideal" classical musician. In C. Dromey & J. Haferkorn (Eds.), *The classical music industry* (pp. 96–111). Routledge.

Sen, A. (1997). *Choice, welfare and measurement*. Harvard University Press.

Serenade Team. (2025, February 11). The anatomy of a symphony orchestra: Instruments, structure, and performance. *Serenade Magazine*. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from https://serenademagazine.com/the-anatomy-of-a-symphony-orchestra--instruments--structure--and-performance/

Sheldon, K. M., & Corcoran, M. (2019). Comparing the current and long-term career motivations of artists and business-people: Is everyone intrinsic in the end? *Motivation and Emotion, 43*, 218–231. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-018-9723-1

Srakar, A., Vecco, M., & Tóth, Á. (2017). The tale of the cuts and raises: Public budgets for culture in the European countries during the financial crisis. *Hacienda Pública Española, (221)*, 83–109.

Talent development. (n.d.). NJO. Retrieved June 4, 2025, from https://www.njo.nl/english/orchestra/talent-development

Tatli, A., & Özbilgin, M. (2012). Surprising intersectionalities of inequality and privilege: The case of the arts and cultural sector. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal, 31*(3), 249–265.

Taylor, S., & Littleton, K. (2012). *Contemporary identities of creativity and creative work*. Ashgate.

Throsby, D. (1986). *Occupational and employment characteristics of artists*. Policy and Planning Division, Australia Council.

Towse, R. (2019). *A textbook of cultural economics* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Trienekens, S., Juan Carlos, E. C., Schutte, L., & Bremmer, M. (2024). Who has access to a career in Western classical music? Building a tool to evaluate intersectionality in barriers to music education and careers. *Research Studies in Music Education, 46*(3), 388–403.

TurboScribe. (n.d.). *TurboScribe*. https://turboscribe.ai/

Yang, M. (2007). East meets West in the concert hall: Asians and classical music in the century of imperialism, post-colonialism, and multiculturalism. *Asian Music, 38*(1), 1–30.

Yoshihara, M. (2008). *Musicians from a different shore: Asians and Asian Americans in classical music*.

Appendix A. Interview Guide

A. Demographics

1. Can you tell me about your background? (nationality, place of origin, gender, ethnocultural background)
2. How old are you?
3. Growing up, what did your parents do for a living?
    a. What is your parents' educational background?
4. Growing up, or during your studies, did you feel financially secure?
5. Did your family have any relationship to classical music, or other kinds of music? If so, what was that relationship like?

B. Musical education and training

6. What instrument do you play?
7. When and how did you start taking music lessons?
    a. How did you first come to learn an instrument? What led you there?
    b. What is your previous education in music?
8. Where are you currently studying, and what is your study level?
9. What led you to study music? Was there something or someone that particularly influenced you?
10. What was your parents' role in your education? Were they involved?
    a. If so, how? Were they involved the whole time or when exactly?
11. What have been the biggest challenges in your educational journey in classical music?
    a. If you could go back in time, would you do anything differently regarding your education? If yes, what and why?

C. Career aspirations and perceptions of the field

12. Are you working next to your studies?
    a. What do you do?
    b. Any scholarships or financial aid?
13. Do you want to pursue music professionally? If so, why?
    a. When and how did you reach that decision?
14. Where do you see yourself professionally in 5 years?

15. In which field would you like to focus on? (Education, orchestra, solo career, chamber etc.)
    a. What about this particular field is appealing to you?
    b. Would that be in a freelance model, or would you rather be employed by an institution? Why?
16. What do you think of the classical music labour market?
    a. What are your thoughts on career opportunities and success in the field?
17. Creative work often comes with unpaid or low-paid work. Have you experienced this in your professional journey?
    a. What are your thoughts on that?

D. Youth orchestras and NJO

18. What is your experience with NJO?
    a. Are you a permanent member or not?
    b. When did you participate in the orchestra?
19. What initially motivated you to join NJO?
    a. What were your expectations?
    b. How were those expectations met?
20. Have your motivations changed over time?
21. Have you been a member of other youth orchestras?
22. How has your participation in NJO or in other youth orchestras affected you as a person and as a musician?
23. What are your thoughts on the role of youth orchestras in the classical music field and labour market?

E. Future

24. How do you feel about entering the labour market?
25. What are your biggest hopes and fears about working in classical music?
26. Where do you think the classical music scene needs to change?
27. Are there other structural changes that you think should be implemented?

Appendix B. Overview of the Operationalisation of Relevant Concepts.

Concepts	Components	Indicators/Themes
Demographics	Socio-economic and racial background and gender, to be later linked to the *Hiddenness Index* (Trienekens et al. 2024)	a) place of origin b) parents' occupation c) current personal occupation status d) reasons for starting musical training
Background in musical training	Duration of training, study level, previous studies in music	a) Start of musical training b) Highest acquired certificate c) Current study: institution, level
Motivations	The reasons for joining NJO	a) Intrinsic motivation: pleasure, art for art's sake (Hannay, 1954; Abbing, 2002) b) Extrinsic motivation: career aspirations–youth orchestra as internship (Brook et al., 2020)
Decision-making	Self-selection factors (Bull, 2018)	a) School-based provision b) Parental encouragement vs discouragement c) Personal social identity
Classical music field *(Through the members' perceptions. To be taken into consideration throughout the data collection and analysis processes)*	Institutionalisation (Glynn, 2002; Menger, 2006; Upton-Hansen et al., 2021)	Role of formal institutions (e.g. conservatories, orchestras) in a musician's life
	Inequalities in access	a) Financial barriers: high costs of tuition, instruments b) Social barriers: class, ethnocultural, gender and family's background influence access c) Structural barriers: institutional practises privilege certain demographics (Trienekens et al. 2024) d) Elitism (Hamilton, 2009)
Artistic careers in classical music *(through the members' perceptions)*	Perceptions of the job market in classical music, its struggles and how members make sense of it	a) Aspirations to an orchestral career b) Precariousness, insecurity: the gig economy (Morgan & Nelligan, 2018) c) Boundaryless careers: freelance or institution? (Arthur & Rousseau, 2001; Menger, 2006) d) Unpaid or low-paid labour (Morgan & Nelligan, 2018) e) Reliance on non-creative labour (Throsby, 1986)

Appendix C. Codebook

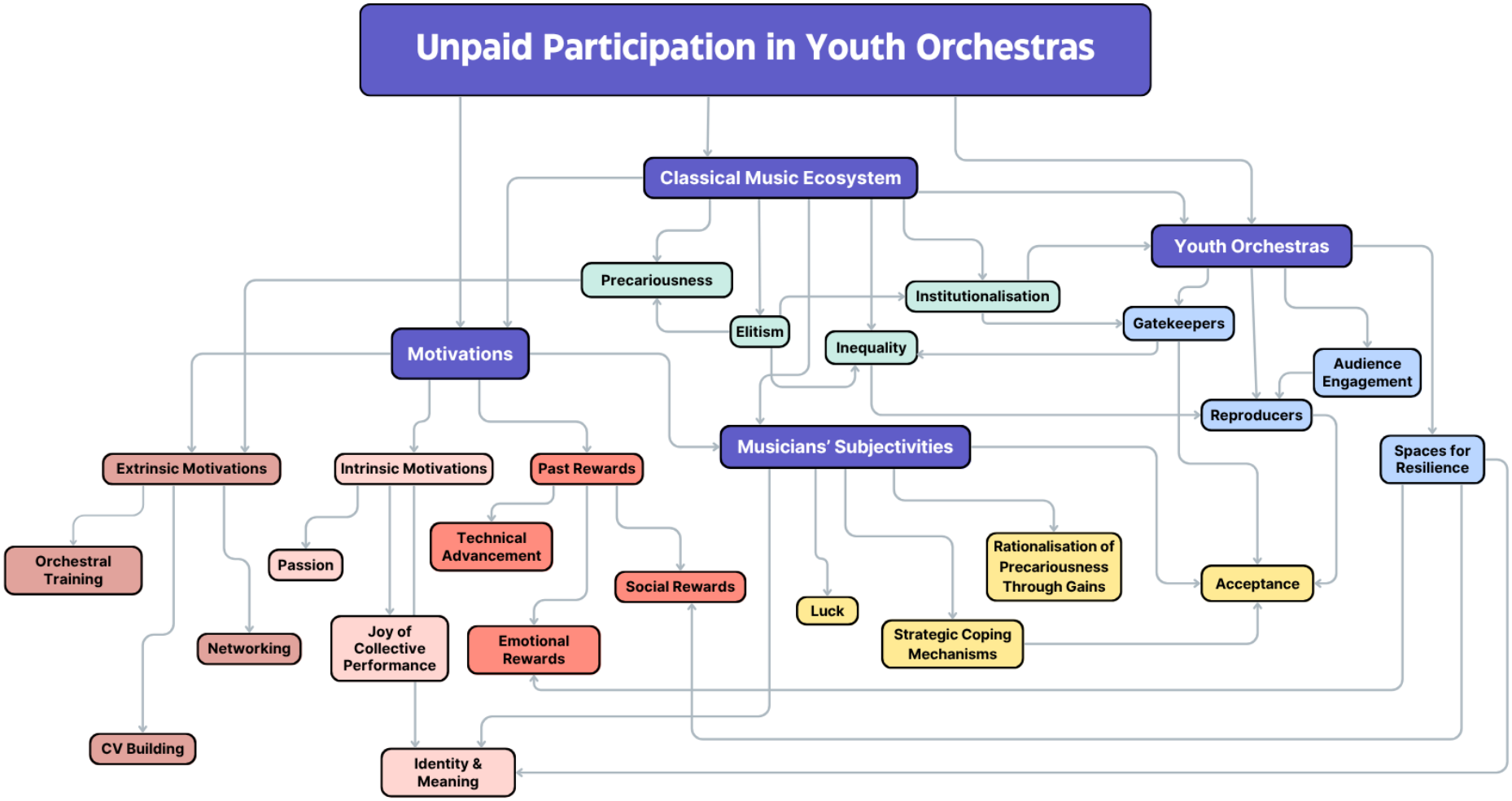
Themes	Sub-themes	Description	Example codes
1. Motivations for unpaid participation in youth orchestras	Extrinsic motivation	Youth orchestra participation is driven by aspirations for career advancement by gaining access to training, professional networking, symbolic capital and CV building.	*For the CV; good conductor; orchestral training; high level tutors; better musician; career opportunities.*
	Intrinsic motivation	Youth orchestra participation is driven by passion for music, personal identity and emotionally fulfilling collective performance.	*Creativity; Enjoyment/ passion/fun; joy of collective performance.*
	Experience as motivation	Prior experience with youth orchestras becomes the motivation for returning, including personal growth, validation and a sense of community fostered in such environments.	*Gains from youth orchestra; rewarding; bonding; musical community; orchestra=validation of self-worth.*
2. Youth orchestras in the classical music ecosystem	Gatekeeping and networks	Youth orchestras function as influential gatekeeping institutions that both prepare and position young musicians within exclusive networks, while reflecting and reproducing structural inequalities of the field.	*NJO network; institutions gatekeeping; hierarchical power in orchestra; agency; closed network.*
	Funding	Structural funding conditions shape quality, legitimacy and professional value of youth orchestras, which are often dependent on context-specific and policy-level decisions.	*Importance of funding; lack of funding.*
	Audience engagement and accessibility	Youth orchestras challenge elitist conventions of the classical music world, by fostering accessibility, diversifying repertoire and engaging younger audiences.	*Audience; audience-funding; intimidating concerts; accessible concerts; new repertoire.*
	Institutionalisation of creativity	Youth orchestras, as emotionally rich and creatively fulfilling spaces, contrast with the routinisation and alienation of professional orchestral work.	*Institutionalisation of creativity; prof vs youth orchestra; stability vs creativity.*

Themes	Sub-themes	Description	Example codes
3. Navigating the profession	Luck as an interpretative frame	Young musicians use the concept of luck to make sense and rationalise the unpredictability, competitiveness and systemic inequities of the classical music profession, as both a coping mechanism and a critique of the field's failures.	*Luck for success; lack of meritocracy; networking.*
	Strategic coping with precariousness	How young musicians navigate the structural precariousness of the field, through emotional resilience and strategic flexibility, balancing unpaid labour, career-building trade-offs, and creative fulfilment.	*Rationalising underpaid\unpaid work through gains; get what you can; normalising precariousness; limit of unpaid/underpaid work; staying open.*
	Music as identity and meaning	Music is highlighted as a core component of selfhood, and offers emotional structure and personal meaning beyond career aspirations, driving perseverance against challenges and rationalising poor conditions in the name of passion.	*Identity; meaning-making; making music; music=tool for life; music=music; taking things personally.*
	Mental and physical wellbeing	The mental and physical toll of working in the field is discussed, where the precarious conditions and the nature of the profession foster emotional and physical challenges. While formal recognition and support is absent, young musicians rely on peer support and personal resilience to cope.	*Mentally difficult; indifference from society; injury; self-doubting.*

Appendix D. Overview of Respondents

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Mother's occupation and education	Father's occupation and education	Place of origin	Etho-cultural background	Education	Employment/ financial status	Instrument
Elena	22	Female	Secretary in construction company (high school graduate)	Real estate agent (4 MAs)	Greece	Greek (white)	BA student, KonCon	Irregular freelancing (gigs) Irregular administrative work Parental support	Viola
Luca	23	Male	Secretary of Minister of Education (BA)	Constructor (high school until 16 y.o.)	Portugal	Angolan/ Cape Verdean (black)	2nd year MA student, KonCon	Scholarship by Orquestra Geração Part-time delivery Parental support	Bassoon, Contrabasson
Sarah	22	Female	Nail technician (high school graduate)	Logistics (high school graduate)	Netherlands	Georgian/ Russian (white)	MA student, CvA	Regular freelancing (gigs) Netherlands Phil Academy	Violin
Eleonora	22	Female	Engineer (BA)	Engineer (BA)	Netherlands	Belarusian/ Dutch (white)	4th year BA student, HKU	Irregular freelancing (gigs) Parental support	Violin
Riley	22	Female	Classical singing teacher at Codarts and freelancing (HBO)	Classical composer freelancer (HBO)	Netherlands	Dutch/Swedish (white)	3rd year BA student, HKU	Irregular freelancing (gigs) Parental support	Violin

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Mother's occupation and education	Father's occupation and education	Place of origin	Etho-cultural background	Education	Employment/ financial status	Instrument
Jordan	20	Male	Stay-at-home mum (Realschule)	Computer science professor at University (Post-doc)	UK	German (white)	3rd year BA student, HKU	Irregular freelancing (gigs) Parental support	Viola
Mary	26	Female	High school teacher (BA)	Electrician (technical education)	Greece	Greek (white)	1st year MA student, CvA	Irregular freelancing (gigs) Parental support	Cello
Alexis	22	Female	Manager in dental clinic (Unknown education)	Pilot (Military school)	Spain	Spanish (white)	BA graduate, KonCon	Irregular freelancing (gigs) Part-time alternative job Parental support	Viola
Finn	25	Male	High school teacher (BA)	High school teacher (BA)	Australia	Australian (white)	MA graduate, Codarts MA student, Folkwang Universität	Part-time supermarket employee Irregular freelancing (gigs) Parental support	(French) Clarinet
Blake	25	Female	Accountant (High school graduate)	Policeman (Police academy)	Cyprus	Cypriot (white)	MA graduate (2023), HKU	Regulat freelancing (teaching in schools) Part-time hospitality job	Flute
Dylan	28	Male		Supermarket employee (basic	Spain	Spanish (white)	MA graduate (2023), KonCon	Regular freelancing in ES & NL (gigs)	French horn

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Mother's occupation and education	Father's occupation and education	Place of origin	Etho-cultural background	Education	Employment/ financial status	Instrument
			Cleaning services (Basic education, unti 14 y.o.)	education until 16 y.o.)				Parental support	
Sam	28	Male	High school teacher (BA)	Voice actor (Unknown education)	Spain	Spanish (white)	MA graduate (2021), KonCon	Regular freelancing (gigs)	French horn

Appendix E. Findings Concept Map