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*MUSIC AS CAPITAL:*  
**DEPUTISING AMONG LONDON'S FREELANCE MUSICIANS**

**Stephen Cottrell**

*Deputising, the substitution of one musician by another for a particular performance event, has long been a common feature of London's musical landscape. Although it may at first appear a simple operation of personal logistics, it is in fact a transaction permeated by judgements on musicianship and musicality, social relations, individual identities, and basic economics. Thus, from this perspective, musical events can be seen as symbols which musicians interpret with reference both to their underlying conception of self and their perception of the talents and abilities of those around them. Such issues are here examined from a variety of theoretical perspectives, which offer useful insights into this deceptively complex process.<sup>1</sup>*

## **Introduction**

Although ethnomusicologists have long paid lip service to the notion that Western art music (WAM) practice should be considered a legitimate area for their research, the number of actual studies undertaken which may be described as being in some way ethnomusicological remains disconcertingly small. Of these, some have considered theoretical aspects of the relationship between WAM and ethnomusicology (e.g. Nettl 1963, Wachsmann 1981), whereas others have concentrated on particular institutions of one sort or another (e.g. Herndon 1988, Kingsbury 1988, Born 1995, Nettl 1995). Such approaches are in noticeable contrast to ethnomusicological work on musicians in non-western cultures (e.g. Neuman 1980, Sakata 1983, Baily 1988), where the perspective offered is frequently one of musicians more fluidly integrated into and contextualised within the larger social whole, not so much perceived as belonging to institutions or ensembles, but identified through familial association, social rank, hereditary ascription, etc. - notwithstanding that such differences are also in part natural consequences of the different structures prevailing in these various societies.

Yet it is these latter studies which more accurately inform the approach taken in this paper, in which I examine the lives of professional freelance musicians in London, and especially (although not exclusively) those not regularly employed by any one ensemble or institution. I shall particularly consider the issue of deputising, a significant arena for interaction between

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for the observations made by my two anonymous readers in certain key areas of this paper, which have undoubtedly strengthened it.

musicians, since it is here that issues of social relations, artistic impulse, commercial transactions and both self conception and individual identities<sup>2</sup> become intertwined.

\*Although the paper is written largely in the first person, I have introduced a number of quotes from other musicians (often taken from recorded interviews) in an attempt to balance the authorial voice, and these are presented separated from my own text, italicised but unattributed. The arguments for and against the various methods of representing others in ethnographic texts are well rehearsed elsewhere (e.g. Marcus and Fisher 1986, Clifford and Marcus 1986, Geertz 1988, Wolf 1992, among many others) and space precludes me from dealing with these issues here; the interested (or outraged) reader may peruse my own thoughts on these thorny issues in Cottrell 1999:27-30.

### **Variety as the spice of life**

*Two musicians were booked for an engagement in Thailand; one was a jazz musician and the other was a show musician, i.e. a musician who specialises in playing musicals. In order to increase their rather poor fee for this gig they decided to try and smuggle some drugs back to England on their way out of the country. Naturally, they were caught and subsequently sentenced to death. When the day came for the sentence to be carried out they were both brought before a firing squad, and the captain of the firing squad went up to the show musician and asked him if he had one final request. "Yes," he replied, "I would like to hear the entire works of Andrew Lloyd Webber once more before I die". The captain was a little taken aback by this, but he agreed to it. He then went over to the jazz musician and asked him if he had a final request, and the jazz musician looked at him and said, "Yes – can you please shoot me first?"*

I have heard (and told) this joke in a number of situations among many different musicians, all of whom, it seemed to me, appreciated the joke. No doubt our collective appreciation was based largely on an implied judgement of the musical value (howsoever determined) of the works of Andrew Lloyd Webber. But in order for the joke to succeed another, more subtle, distinction is being made, between the image of a jazz musician and that of a show player. Or rather, for the joke to make sense it is accepted that such a distinction could be made, regardless of the potential inaccuracy of such stereotyping, as will become clearer below.

\*Playing jazz, of course, requires a very different set of cognitive skills and a different musical aesthetic to playing in a show, and these are only two of the various musical styles with which a freelance musician in London might need to be familiar. Other styles include, for example, classical and contemporary Western art music, commercial studio work and pop

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<sup>2</sup> I make a distinction throughout this piece between 'self conception', that is, how we conceive of or 'see' ourselves, and 'individual identity', that is, how others see us - our identity within the larger social group.

music. These different skills are fundamental to a musician's employability: the more styles in which you are convincing, the more work you are available for, and the busier and therefore wealthier you are likely to be.

\*I do not claim that it is only in London that musicians are required to cover such wide musical ground. I imagine that much the same occurs in other large cities, such as New York, where there are also a variety of musical styles available for popular consumption. Nor is this necessarily exclusive to Western culture but is perhaps a feature of urban music-making generally. Neuman has shown how rural musicians in the Hindustani tradition evolved various adaptive strategies during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as increasing numbers of them migrated to the urban areas of Delhi, an environment which encouraged them to become proficient in musical styles or instruments outside of their previous narrow specialisms (see Neuman 1978); similar patterns of socio-musical change are evident among musicians in the Carnatic tradition in Madras (L'Armand and L'Armand 1978:140).

\*In colloquial terms, however, London is frequently referred to as the musical capital of the world, and there are perhaps more professional musicians here than anywhere else. They are drawn by the numerous performing opportunities the city offers: five major orchestras and many smaller ones, together with a variety of ad hoc freelance groups and semi-permanent chamber ensembles; a constant turnover of West End shows, including some which seem to have established their own permanence and which attract a large tourist clientele; a thriving although badly remunerated jazz circuit; and, until recently, considerable commercial and studio work, although this has declined quite dramatically over the last decade or so because of increased competition from elsewhere.

\*In one sense this is a dynamic equilibrium, a constant but changing source of work supplied by a constant but changing pool of musicians; yet it is also rather unbalanced, since the number of musicians seeking work consistently outstrips the supply. The end result is that, in general, London musicians are more badly paid than their equivalents in other Western cities – competition keeps fees low – and frequently have to work harder by comparison. There is little empirical evidence to support this view<sup>3</sup> but there is a great deal of anecdotal data. Consider the following statement from a South African orchestra player working with the London Philharmonic Orchestra:

Musicians overseas think London is the centre of the universe, they all want to play here, and when they come they find people just killing themselves to play.<sup>4</sup>

This intense competition for work, while no doubt partially responsible for the continuing high musical standards in London, inevitably breeds a great deal of insecurity. The idea that

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<sup>3</sup> Although one obvious indication of this is the much higher levels of State support given to orchestras in other European cities, and the reduced working hours of their members.

“you’re only as good as your last gig” is an ever-present if seldom articulated worry. This insecurity is heightened by the fact that the majority of musicians are freelance, with little guarantee of future employment. A very brief description of the contractual situation in some of the different performing situations freelance musicians might encounter will illustrate this point.

\*In the classical world only those musicians working in the BBC orchestras can be considered employees proper, with permanent contracts. Players in the other major orchestras are technically freelance, although once appointed as members of the orchestra they are generally guaranteed first refusal of all work, subject to certain conditions. However, the fragile economic positions of all these orchestras, the intense competition between them and their collective uncertainty about what the future holds still encourages a considerable sense of insecurity among the musicians involved. In smaller ensembles and ad hoc groups there is a general understanding that the fixer, the person responsible for booking the musicians, will usually call upon the same performers from one event to the next. But it remains a precarious situation, and if a musician is unavailable for certain events or falls out with the fixer, leader or conductor, then he or she risks being quietly passed over for future engagements, usurped by those more willing or able to give the commitment asked for.

\*Away from this classical world there is again very little security in other musical positions. Musicians booked for West End shows do have a contract of employment but this is only for the run of a particular show, akin to a musical lottery whereby the musician’s employment is subject entirely to the often fickle demands of the marketplace: while some shows might achieve a degree of permanence, others close within days. For some musicians it is their dearest wish to land a long-running show, and while they may well laugh at the show-musician/jazz-musician joke related above they might think twice before telling it to the fixer for *The Phantom of the Opera*. For commercial sessions and studio work there are often signed agreements and contracts, generally regulated by the Musicians’ Union, but these cover only the details of one particular session or group of sessions, giving some protection to any further exploitation of the musician’s work but no guarantee of continuing or future employment. And the jazz world operates very largely on word of mouth, except for cruises or occasional residencies elsewhere, which again would generally be measured in weeks rather than months.

\*Although I have outlined only four particular areas of professional music-making in London, and not in any detail, it should be clear that in terms of work guarantees and long-term employment most professional musicians’ lives are riddled with insecurity.

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in Tait 1996: 15.

## Deputising

One direct result of this insecurity is that most freelance musicians, in order both to maximise their work opportunities and to retain the widest possible field of contacts, quite literally take on more work than they can do. All musicians eventually find themselves in a situation where, having accepted a particular engagement, they are subsequently offered different work covering the same period, and which, for reasons I shall come to, they would rather undertake. In order to manage this situation musicians might adopt a number of strategies, which include the acceptance of both dates followed by a later withdrawal from one or the other; the provisional acceptance of both dates on the understanding that later withdrawal might follow; or perhaps the immediate rejection of the second date with a conversation along the lines of: "I'd really like to have done it but I'm already working that night. Thanks for asking and do call again".

\*In situations where more than one date has been accepted, i.e. where a musician is committed to being in two places at once, the solution is to engage another musician as a deputy, commonly referred to as a "dep", who is sent to play in the prior engagement, thereby releasing the first musician to undertake their preferred work. This process is properly known as "deputising", but more commonly described as "depping" or "sending a dep", and is long established, as Ehrlich's description of musicians' lives in the 1760s reveals:

The need to piece together an income from diverse sources imposed a sense of vulnerability which tended to encourage mercenary behaviour, and the increasing influence of market forces required attitudes and skills more common among tradesmen than artists. If fees were tempting one might relax musical standards, take on more work than could adequately be performed, or send deputies to less remunerative functions (Ehrlich 1985:31).

Some two and a half centuries later deputising remains a necessary strategy for musicians in a highly competitive environment.

*The other thing about freelancing is that it's one big juggling act. You've got to keep ten balls up in the air at the same time, you've got to keep lots of different people happy. Because if you are saying no to the same people all the time then they'll stop asking you. So you've got to occasionally say yes... If I was a freelancer who kept on saying "I'm sorry" at the last minute, "I can't do it," then eventually they would just stop ringing me. It's just a question of being intelligent and juggling things, and trying to keep all these balls up in the air.*

For many of these musicians such ball-juggling is so familiar that it no doubt appears as a simple matter of logistics and expediency; however, it is an operation permeated with questions of individual identity and both economic and musical value judgements, as the following explanation of the process will show.

\*There are two stages to the operation. Firstly, and most obviously, the musician must decide whether or not to accept the second engagement offered. This is not always straightforward and cannot necessarily be resolved as a simple evaluation of financial gain. Secondly, the musician must find a suitable deputy for the job from which he or she is trying to extricate him or herself. Most musicians, by the very nature of the music business, know a considerable number of other musicians of similar type: "It's not what you know, it's who you know". The more musicians you know, the more potential depts are available to you, and, crucially, the more people who know you, the more chance you have of receiving work opportunities from them. Thus, any individual musician can be seen as one part of a web of socio-musical connections, often constructed over many years through school and conservatoire environments, playing with others, hearing others play, hearing of others play, personal recommendations, non-playing social events, and so on. This results in a list of players whom the individual is willing to consider as a suitable deputy for a particular engagement; I know a number of musicians who keep such a list at the back of their diaries for just this purpose. For others, the "list" is more of a mental construct:

*I have a sort of a mental list. It's not a written list and it's not a fixed list because if the date is different in some way, like it's contemporary or it's badly paid or it's well paid or it's orchestral or whatever, the list will change according to those categories. The same sort of order will appear, it'll still be roughly the same list that I'll hold, just a couple of people may swap places for different reasons.*

\*Moreover, as is clear from the above quote, each name on this list connotes an image of that person's musical and social abilities. For example, Jack is a great classical player but he doesn't swing very well, so he's inappropriate for jazzy shows; Sarah is a good straight player, and a good swinger, but her improvising is awful; Mark is a great improviser but his sight reading is very weak; Julie is an excellent classical player, but I know she hates the section principal in this particular orchestra; John would cover this show for me really well, but I know he's very "established", and he'll want a lot of money to go to Manchester for one night, and so on.

*Definitely in your own mind you know what you're happier on, and what you're not happier on. I think with other colleagues you draw on, you understand what they're happier on, and you build up a catalogue of what they prefer to do and what they couldn't do... From experience you best know what your colleagues can do.*

\*To illustrate this process more clearly, as well as the various pitfalls that may be contained within it, I shall outline four incidents involving the use of deputies. Although I have presented these as hypothetical examples they are based on episodes in which I have been directly involved, or have involved musicians whom I know well; and I have discussed the issues arising from them at length with a number of other musicians, both in formal interviews and during the course of my performing activities. The whole process of deputising is a constant source of discussion among musicians, and such discussions are, of course, one of the ways by which musicians construct their images of one another. I have no doubt that similar or analogous situations to those I describe are widely replicated on a daily basis, albeit for different musicians in a variety of different contexts.

- Musician A has a temporary contract in the pit orchestra of a well-known musical, undertaking a long national tour, during which he is offered a few nights' work with a progressive modern dance company. After several months on the road he is bored with playing the same music every night and would appreciate the challenge of playing more difficult music. Although the dance company pays more than the show he has to cover the dep's travel costs, and he is also bound by the convention of paying show deps extra money for out-of-town shows, to compensate for the frequently disproportionate travelling involved relative to the amount earned; so there will be little financial gain on his part. The show is presently in Newcastle so, attempting to economise, he books a less familiar player from Manchester rather than using a musician he knows well from London. He sends the dep to do the show and works with the dance company, resulting in considerable extra travel and no financial reward, but he enjoys working with different musicians and likes the new music he has learned. He is subsequently offered further dates with the same company. On returning to the show he finds that his dep did not play to the satisfaction of the Musical Director and he is instructed not to use him again, but only to use musicians that the MD is familiar with from London. Therefore, he will lose even more money in fulfilling the additional dance company engagements he has been offered.
- Musician B is working in a top West End musical. She has the relative security of knowing that the show is fully booked for the next six months, she is well paid, particularly in comparison to a touring show, and she is living at home. She is offered a date with a provincial orchestra playing a big 19<sup>th</sup>-century symphony. This involves several overnight stays and, being not as well paid as the London show, means she will lose money. Her normal dep on the show is not free for those days, so she must get another musician trained for her part and pay them to sit beside her for one or two shows to learn the music, meaning she will make even more of a loss. However, she takes the



orchestra job because she really wants to be an orchestral player and needs to have this kind of experience on her c.v. for future auditions. While she is with the orchestra she plays well and is invited to undertake a trial for a position soon to become vacant. When she returns to the show she finds that her dep also played well, and she books the same dep to cover some of the time off she will need to do the orchestral trial.

- Musician C has agreed to a date with a quartet with whom he works regularly, performing difficult contemporary music which requires considerable rehearsal. The day before the concert he is offered some extremely lucrative sessions from a fixer for whom he occasionally works. He knows that the group, of which he is a regular member and who are also his close friends, cannot possibly find somebody else to learn such complicated music in the time available; he also shares with them an ideological commitment to the music the group is trying to promote. Regretfully, he turns the sessions down, resulting in a substantial loss of income.
- Musician D plays regularly with a small chamber orchestra, albeit on a freelance basis. She is offered some reasonably well-paid studio work at a time when she is already committed to a particularly prestigious Royal Festival Hall date with the orchestra. She agrees to do the studio work because this is through a fixer well known for his good contacts and for whom she has not previously worked. She books a dep who has played in the orchestra many times, but leaves it as late as possible before telling the fixer, presenting him with a *fait accompli* and making it appear that the other work has been offered to her at very short notice; this is because she has turned down the last two dates with this orchestra. Naturally, she is concerned about her future relations with the orchestra, particularly when she subsequently learns there is a short foreign tour for which she has not been booked. Two months later the session fixer rings again to offer her some more work.

\*In these examples we can see some of the factors that an individual musician must consider before deciding whether to substitute one musical engagement for another. For musician A the problems of finance and logistics, i.e. booking a deputy from London or Manchester, must be weighed against his desire to perform different and more challenging music; musician B also has slight logistical and financial problems, but her desire to become a full-time orchestral player is a stronger consideration; musician C would probably prefer to do the more lucrative commercial work, but he is bound by his musical and social obligations to the quartet; and musician D is most clearly the one who risks sacrificing an established contact for the uncharted waters of a potentially more lucrative one.

*Sometimes I have been in a situation where if I was just doing tutti somewhere I've been so desperate I would just go to a diary service and say, "for God's sake find me somebody. I've got to get out of this date". It's going to cost me X amount of money. A lot of it again comes down to money. You might have quite a nice date when suddenly you're offered three days of film sessions, which you know are going to be mind-blowingly boring, but you're going to come away with quite a lot of money.*

\*It is perhaps worth making clear that in most circumstances a musician will pay his or her deputy directly, rather than expecting the organisation involved to take on this responsibility, although the latter does occur, particularly with larger orchestras and theatre companies. As with most other areas of social interaction, the exchange of money can lead to friction if the deputy feels that he or she has been underpaid in some way or, equally irritating, if payment is rather slow in forthcoming. Conversely, some musicians will make a point of paying their deputies even before they themselves have received payment for the original job, an attitude which, although laudable, can cause cash-flow difficulties.

\*Although freelance musicians are frequently called upon to resolve the kinds of conflicts I have outlined, it would be wrong to suggest that the deputising process is always invoked when a musician wishes to withdraw from a work commitment. In certain situations, particularly with the major orchestras or significant commercial work, it is possible that a musician would simply phone the fixer or orchestral manager and request to be allowed off the date, leaving the fixer to book another player. Even in these cases, however, a musician will frequently provisionally arrange a deputy who they think the fixer/orchestral manager will accept - a socio-musical damage limitation exercise which attempts to lubricate the process of extricating the musician from their commitment while still maintaining sufficiently cordial relations to be considered for future work.

*When you book a dep what you want is not somebody who's going to be brilliant, that's neither here nor there. What you want is somebody who's going to be competent, and almost invisible. If they're too brilliant then you don't get the job next time! The worst thing that can happen is for a fixer to say, that dep you sent in wasn't much cop. That's very bad news because you feel that you're under attack...So what you want is somebody who's going to go in, be no trouble, get on with everyone, get on with the job, and get out again.*

### **Economic capital, musical capital, and self conception**

Clearly, deputising is essentially a two stage process: firstly, deciding whether to substitute one musical engagement for another, by considering factors such as those I have outlined above; and secondly, if accepting an alternative engagement, assessing the musical and

personal attributes of potential deputies who might be asked to undertake the first date. Although the system may seem superficially quite straightforward, and is used on a daily basis by musicians as a perfectly natural consequence of their professional situation, it is underpinned by a number of significant concepts which lend themselves to ethnomusicological examination. In particular, ideas relating to the accumulation of particular types of capital seem useful in considering the first stage of the process, while anthropological theories of reciprocity and gift relationships offer some insights into the second stage.

In invoking the concept of capital one is inevitably drawn to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, where similar approaches play a substantial role. Bourdieu argues that culture can be examined in terms of a number of inter-related forms of power, the most obvious being derived directly from economic power – economic capital. But he also suggests that power can be achieved through the acquisition of other types of capital which may, under certain circumstances, be convertible into economic capital. He suggests that cultural capital, for example, is a measure of “legitimate” knowledge of one kind or another, acquired through “early, imperceptible learning, performed within the family from the earliest days of life and extended by a scholastic learning which presupposes and completes it” (Bourdieu 1984:66); social capital indicates degrees of relationship with significant others; symbolic capital represents “prestige, reputation, fame, etc.” (Bourdieu 1991:230). I wish to suggest that the engagements which musicians trade between themselves through the deputy system I have outlined above can be analysed not only in terms of the economic capital they imply, but also through the consideration of another quality, which I shall describe as musical capital.

\*Musical capital can be seen as a measure of the desirability, from the musician’s point of view, of their participation in the event, as well as its value to them as they seek to establish a reputation and profile for undertaking particular types of work within their professional world. In this sense it has something in common with Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic capital, in that it connotes differing levels of honour and prestige as being represented by different performance events; and it resonates with his ideas on cultural capital, in that the latter similarly and necessarily distinguishes between “legitimate” and popular culture. It is also allied to Bourdieu’s notion of “taste”, whereby consumers express preferences for cultural goods on the basis of social class and the educational opportunities afforded to them. Yet none of Bourdieu’s concepts comfortably encompasses the full complexities of the deputy system as I see them, and my notion of musical capital is distinguished from his various types in two important ways.

\*First, I would argue that musicians are conscious of the different amounts of musical capital represented by these events, and are thus able *deliberately* to process them for their own ends. The musical capital they seek to accrue, and the conception of self which underlies the choices they make, is not primarily dependent on social class or educational background, although it may have some relationship with personality (see Kemp 1996). It is

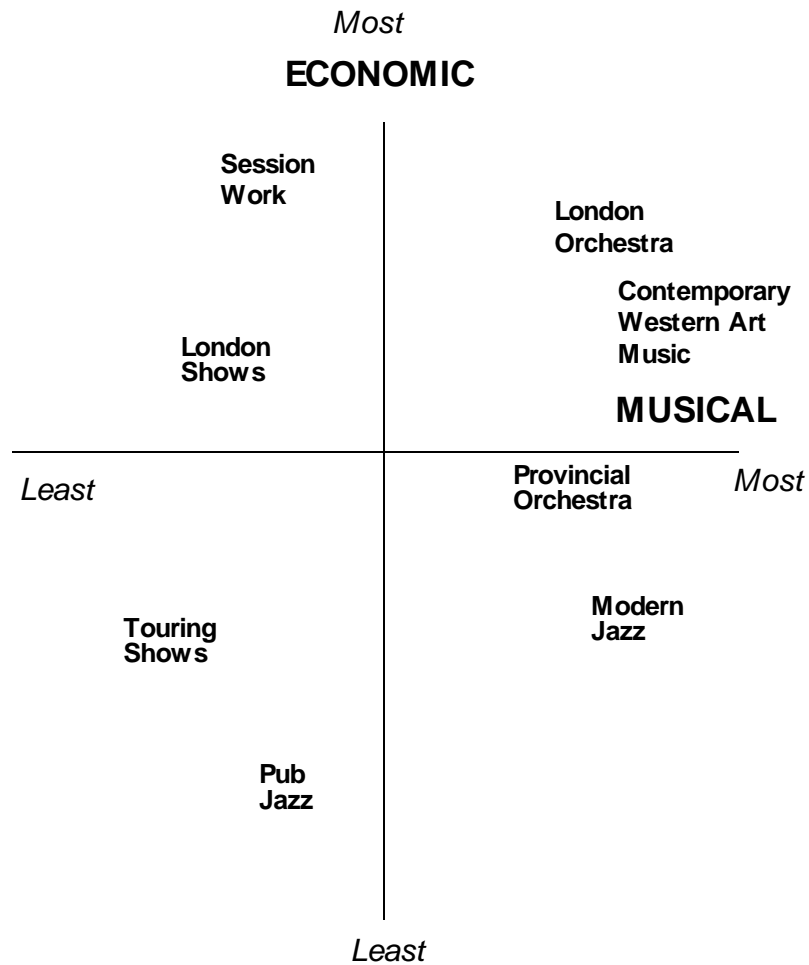
only through such self-conscious deliberation that we can see something of their self-conception and individual identity within the larger social group. This notion of agency, of the individual making conscious decisions about how to process various cultural goods or symbols, sits uncomfortably within Bourdieu's general theory. He does of course lay great emphasis on practice, wherein actors develop a practical logic of how to pursue their lives which they then use strategically to achieve particular ends. But for Bourdieu such practice seems not to be reflexively employed, but is presented rather as a consequence of the individual's familiarity with his or her social space; this is a "practical mastery...acquired by experience...and one which works outside conscious control and discourse" (Bourdieu 1990:61). It is here that he and I take rather different views, and I am inclined to agree with Richard Jenkins's observation that "actors must know more about their situation, and that knowledge must be more valid, than Bourdieu proposes" (Jenkins 1992:97).

\*Second, because musicians in this context are not simply consumers, the economic capital inherent within each engagement necessarily confuses the issue. Bourdieu writes that "art and cultural consumption are predisposed...to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences" (Bourdieu 1984:7); in other words, we betray our social origins through the cultural goods we consume. But for musicians, the necessity of earning a living does not allow a completely free choice of engagements, nor the "luxury" of one predicated solely on social class or personal taste. As I hope I have shown, musicians may choose to undertake an engagement they do not particularly wish to fulfil simply because of the financial rewards it offers. Their need to earn a living through their reproduction of culture does not allow them a choice in the way that Bourdieu's theory of cultural consumption suggests.

However, although my perspective may differ from that of Bourdieu, I nevertheless believe this to be a useful concept in the present context, and my argument here would be that London's musicians are, on a daily basis, actively engaged in juxtaposing varying amounts of both economic and musical capitals, according to their particular view of themselves as musicians; and furthermore, that this self-conception can be defined and objectified according to the balance they achieve, or attempt to achieve, between these different forms of capital, manifested through their manipulation of different performance events.

In Figure 1 I have constructed a diagram showing how a relationship may be posited between these two forms of capital, and how the various work opportunities for London's musicians may be mapped against them.

Figure 1



The vertical axis represents economic capital, the valorisation of certain specific performance events, with the most lucrative engagements at the top and the least lucrative at the bottom. The horizontal axis shows the degree of musical capital associated with a particular event, expressed from the performer's perspective as the desirability of taking part, from the least on the left to the most on the right.

\*While economic capital can be assessed empirically, i.e. we can compare how much a musician is paid for one type of performance event as opposed to another, musical capital, in this case and elsewhere, is not only more subjective but also rather more nebulous. The desirability of certain types of work changes from one musician to another for many complex reasons: career aspirations, musical tastes, socio-musical connections, etc., and it is this which allows us to see how musicians conceive their sense of themselves as authorial individuals. Because I constructed this particular map it is very much a subjective expression of my own self conception as a musician working in London. Others would certainly map different performance events in different places, more clearly reflecting their own perceptions of themselves. For example, because I am afflicted by an abiding interest in contemporary Western art music this is placed towards the extreme right of the musical axis; but I realise that my fellow musicians do not all see it in this light and many would place it much further to

the left. Equally, others who aspire to a long-running West End show might well not regard this particular type of employment with the same mixed feelings as I do. So there is a necessary and in-built degree of flexibility within this “map” which not only allows for changing perceptions of musical employment but also for changes in the levels of remuneration of certain events. For example, although playing with a London orchestra remains a relatively prestigious occupation to which many classically-trained musicians aspire, the competition between these orchestras for ever-decreasing funds has meant a corresponding reduction in the fees for individual concerts, so such events would be positioned at a lower point on the vertical axis than might previously have been the case.

\*Seen in this way, the different musical engagements which individual musicians undertake in the course of their work become symbols of their involvement in this particular community. Each type of performance event, while superficially “the same” for each musician, is in fact both a flexible, abstract concept as well as an obvious economic reality, which musicians imbue with different meanings according to context, and which they process, as Cohen suggests, “if not as wholly free agents then, at the very least, as interpreters” (Cohen 1994:94).

\*Furthermore, while I am necessarily concentrating here on the professional musicians who are central to this paper, I suggest that all those who are in some way paid for the provision of musical services, i.e. paid for playing, must also somehow resolve this conflict between musical and economic capitals, between art and mammon: the semi-professional violinist whose day job perhaps gives her financial security still has to make decisions about whether to accept a particular engagement or not, decisions that must assess both the remuneration on offer and her own desire to be involved with a particular event; the church organist no doubt regards the prospect of playing a Handel organ concerto with the local amateur orchestra, however badly paid, as being a pleasant change from yet another performance of Mendelssohn’s wedding march. Harry Christianson’s work among semi-professional jazz musicians in the North of England also seems to confirm this:

Some [semi-pro jazz musicians] can earn bigger money playing with bands which play for ballroom dancing on Saturday evenings, but are only too glad to get the chance to play something more to their taste and with more freedom of expression even for very little money...a bass player who gets regular well-paid work with a well-established folk group in the Black Country expressed his eagerness to be invited to play jazz at much lower pay: ‘We play the same fifteen to twenty numbers over and over again that we have been playing for years. When we do a new number we rehearse it for weeks before we do it on a gig. It gets really boring. But when I play jazz we never play the same programme two gigs running. Even numbers we’ve done before we play differently each time’ (Christianson 1987:224).

## Individual identity and reciprocal obligation

\*I have deliberately used the term “self conception” to emphasise the subjective nature of this first stage of the deputising process, and to contrast it with the concept of “individual identity”, which requires an essentially social view of the individual. But it is the question of individual identities, the way in which we see others and they see us, which provides the foundation for the second stage of the deputising process, choosing and booking a suitable deputy. This requires a musician to make a number of musical and social judgements about fellow musicians, and it is through such judgements that, in part, the identity of an individual is constructed within the larger social group. Such judgements rely on images of the abilities of others which may be built up over many years, in various ways and in many different contexts. I have overheard (and taken part in) hundreds of conversations in which somebody’s abilities have been commented upon, either in praise or denigration, all of which feed back into the mental images I have of particular players’ abilities and which sit alongside my own impression of their skills, if I know them personally. It is unusual, albeit not entirely unheard of, for musicians to book somebody they do not know, or who has not been recommended by someone whose judgement they trust.

*I would always think about what it is that I’m doing, and whether that person would fit into that job. No, I wouldn’t book just any old person to do any old job, unless I was absolutely desperate (laughs) which I have done before now.*

\*Furthermore, the act of offering different types of work, each perceived as having varying amounts of economic and musical capital, is itself invested with all sorts of subtle messages. For example, if a musician has some relatively well-paid commercial work in his diary but is offered an even more lucrative date, he is in a strong position to offer the first work to other musicians that he perceives as being of high social rank, i.e. those who are recognised as senior names in the business, either because of their playing ability or for reasons to do with the type of work they most commonly undertake. In offering work which is already well remunerated a musician obviously implies that he or she is able to give this work away because they are doing something that is even better paid. This in turn contributes to the image that the receiver has of the giver and, if such interactions take place often, will perhaps elevate the giver into a new social rank among his or her peers. Conversely, a musician may be ill-advised to offer work to those for whom it is inappropriate, since this may prove counter-productive. It would be unwise to offer, say, one night playing second clarinet in a touring show to a musician whose regular work is with a top orchestra or who is a busy session player. They may feel slightly offended by the offer of what they would perceive as a relatively unprestigious engagement; and this in turn, if done in the wrong way, might result in a more negative image of the person offering the work.

\*Because the act of appointing a deputy is endowed with both musical and social significance it can be a source of tension between musicians if it does not go smoothly, and there are a number of ways in which it can go wrong. A few examples will illustrate this. In the first instance, an orchestral player was asked to advise on which musicians might be brought into the orchestra for a piece which required an unusual combination of particular instruments. Having been asked to recommend players, she passed over a number of people close to her, and with whom she had played for some time in a chamber ensemble, asking only one player from the group and not the others. The reasons she later cited (“A” is not really a classical player, “B” isn’t very reliable, etc.) are typical of the kinds of assessments musicians make of each other, although here I have stated them very baldly; the particular reasons behind a decision are often rather more complex. In this instance the musicians who had been passed over, but who considered themselves suitable for the job, learned of what had happened, which created considerable social tension and led in part to a schism within the chamber ensemble; there was clearly a significant disjunction in this case between the self-conception of the players passed over and their identities more widely perceived, leading to a Turner-esque social drama requiring some kind of resolution. In another instance, a musician (I will call him “Phil”) booked a close friend and colleague (“John”) as a deputy for a group with whom he (Phil) had played for several years, and which was a significant engagement for him in terms of its musical capital. A conflict arose when, after the original engagement, the fixer for the group then asked John to take on some additional (and unrelated) work with the group, which Phil would normally have expected to do. John was caught between his desire to undertake the work (for reasons of both economics and prestige) and his “loyalty” to Phil, with whom he had exchanged work on many occasions over the years and who he knew would be upset if he chose to undertake these additional concerts. John did undertake the work, Phil was indeed upset, vowing (in the heat of the moment) never to use John as a deputy again, and significant tension was generated between the two which took several months to resolve.

\*One final illustration of the difficulties that can arise in this process is known colloquially among musicians as “being given the DCM”. “Don’t Come Monday” is the euphemistic description of the deputy who has been “blacklisted” by a fixer, musical director, conductor or other musicians, usually for reasons of musical unsuitability but occasionally because of personal behaviour (and sometimes, musicians will tell you, for no reason at all), thus preventing the musician who booked the deputy from using him again in this particular environment. This is often a difficult situation and musicians are not slow to castigate others, particularly those in some position of authority, if they feel a colleague has been rejected for no apparent reason, or for a reason with which they do not agree.



*It's something you find very hard to say to your dep, presumably you've put in a friend, and you know that the next time you want to get work off with that particular fixer it's just going to be that little bit harder.*

Such difficulties can again strain the relationships between musicians, even in those situations where a deputy realises that the musician who booked him or her is not directly to blame.

\*Another issue which arises within the deputy system is that of reciprocal obligation. Offering work to another musician, particularly if done regularly to the same person, engenders some feeling of obligation, i.e. that this favour should be returned. Musicians do have a sense of community and if one member of the community is seen to be helping you regularly then you feel obliged to give some help back if possible. One musician, who had recently been given a contract for a musical having previously depped frequently on another show, said that she felt very guilty because she had had few alternative engagements since her new show began, and therefore no opportunity to offer some deputy work to the person who had previously offered her so much. This sense of guilt was further compounded by the fact that the first show had now closed and the musician to whom she felt this obligation had no regular work.

*Some people look at it as if I'm doing them a favour by giving them work, and they feel it has to be returned – if you give something then you're looking for something back. I mean I've been in a situation doing 'Oliver', for Julie, she asked me to come in on clarinet. Fine, I did it, and I was very happy to do it. But there's nothing that I do that I could give her back. Now I know she will never call me for anything again.*

Ideally, the fulfilment of this obligation – the payment of the debt, so to speak – should be in kind. A prestigious orchestral engagement or lucrative session would, in an ideal world, be repaid by an offer of work of similar magnitude; and likewise, an obligation incurred through the exchange of a less important date may be discharged with a similar offer of work. Naturally, musicians do not live in such an ideal world; the exchange of work seldom proceeds in this equalitative fashion and there are numerous “debts” which remain unpaid or are repaid with unequal offers of work. However, this principle of reciprocal obligation, of helping those who help you, although largely unspoken, remains a significant issue in the trading of musical engagements between musicians.

This web of reciprocal obligations which the deputy system engenders might be conceived of as a series of gift relationships. Mauss's pioneering study *The Gift* (1990; first published 1950) established gift exchange as an important component of economic anthropology, and the relationships produced through the exchange of musical performance events can be further illuminated by some consideration of subsequent work in this field. In

particular, Sahlins, building on Mauss's work, has proposed a "spectrum of reciprocities" (1974:193) defined by its extremes and a mid-point; these three positions he describes as generalised, balanced and negative forms of reciprocity. Generalised reciprocity characterises interactions between close kinsmen or within a restricted social group, and thus there is only a weak obligation to reciprocate; because of the mutual dependence of the close-knit group "the expectation of a direct material return is unseemly. At best it is implicit." (1974:194). Negative reciprocity is the opposite end of the spectrum, and describes "the attempt to get something for nothing with impunity" (:195). This is the most impersonal form of exchange, in which individuals confront each other as opposed interests, each seeking to maximise their own gain at the other's expense. Balanced reciprocity occupies the mid-point between these two. Although the exchange is less "personal" than generalised reciprocity, each party recognises the other's distinct economic and social interests, with the material part of the transaction being at least as important as the social. In this last case, Sahlins suggests, the key indicator is the system's inability to tolerate one-way flows, since "the relations between people are disrupted by a failure to reciprocate within limited time and equivalence leeways" (:195).

\*It is this latter position which most closely describes the social interaction generated by the exchange of work opportunities among musicians and the social relationships which are established or reinforced through such exchanges. As I have shown, musicians do have some sense of honour-bound reciprocal obligation, an expectation that a debt which has been established must, ideally, be repaid in some way. For the system to remain balanced the obligations implied by the offer of work from one musician to another must somehow be discharged, and, as Sahlins so perceptively puts it, "within limited time and equivalence leeways". Such timescales would not be verbalised by musicians, although they would be measured in weeks or months rather than years. And the complexity of the urban musical situation often means that obligations may be discharged in unequal measure – musicians cannot freely determine what work is offered to them and this inevitably influences what they can themselves pass on. Indeed, as Sahlins himself notes, not all exchanges will necessarily fall directly into one of his three categories, but may lie elsewhere in the spectrum (1974:196), suggesting sufficient flexibility in his model to allow for inequalitative transactions. But the underlying principle, whereby the "gift of the gig" both facilitates and underpins social relations within the community, remains intact.

### **Music as capital and music as coin**

I have suggested that performance events can be seen as symbols which musicians manipulate in various ways and through which they refract their sense of inclusion within this particular community. I would also argue that, at the second stage of the deputising process,

these exchanges of musical work might equally be read as the currency by which capital is acquired. Musical engagements can be considered as large, medium or small denomination, in terms both of the economic and/or musical capital with which they are endowed, and may be traded between musicians in a way that is analogous to monetary exchange: a large debt implies a large repayment, or a series of smaller payments, and so on. The system is not flawless and there are many variables within it. I have illustrated the deputising process from my own perspective as a freelance wind player, and the nature of freelance work is perhaps a little different for wind and brass players than for string players, and certainly than for pianists, harpists, accordionists, etc. There is perhaps more variety of work open to brass/wind players than some of these other instrumentalists, who may find themselves less frequent visitors to West End musicals or Sunday lunchtime jazz gigs in the local pub. But I suggest that even among these slightly different musical crafts similar or analogous processes to those I have described also exist. A string player remarked to me:

*I think the great thing about being a freelance player is the variety. One day you can be doing the quartet, the next day you can be doing a film session, the next day you can be doing Mozart players, the day after that I can be doing Ferneyhough with Music Projects, whatever. I mean that is the nice thing.*

Thus, the need to juggle different performance opportunities, and the inherent juxtaposition of economic and musical forms of capital this implies, would seem to be a feature of urban music-making generally, regardless of instrumental specialism.

\*The idea that musical performance events can be viewed as a form of currency is clearly resonant with Nettl's description of three types of "coin" in *Heartland Excursions* (1995:53-55). Here Nettl discusses the exchange of what he calls standard coin (i.e. real money), academic coin, and musical coin between the three dominant factions in American schools of music: teachers, administrators and students. Standard coin is obviously a measure of the monies that are paid to or paid by the members of these three groups; academic coin is measured by, for example, academic titles (university professor, university scholar) or grades awarded to the students; musical coin is less clearly defined but, Nettl argues, arises from a conflict between, on the one hand, the musicians' desire to be paid for what they do, and on the other, the feeling that they should somehow be "above the material world, and that the opportunity of making music, that gift from the supernatural, is somehow its own reward" (:55). In other words, in the competitive world of the music school, being given the opportunity to perform is itself a kind of remuneration. In Nettl's analysis the highest form of musical coin, because of the dual role of the music school as a teaching institution and entertainment provider, is to be appointed to positions of leadership in musical organisation, i.e. to be made a conductor of ensembles.

While Nettl's analysis is necessarily different from mine, given that we are covering two rather different environments, there is an obvious similarity in our terminologies. Some of his assertions appear less appropriate in the context of my own work, particularly his statement that "musical coin [is] translatable into academic and standard coin" (:54). I can see that in an academic institution this may be the case: a good finals performance will lead to a good exam grade, or a more significant conducting position may lead to a pay rise. But in the wider world the relationship between these various issues is far more tenuous; as I hope my analysis has shown, musicians may choose to divest themselves of potential economic reward if they feel that the musical rewards compensate for this. Yet there are certain circumstances in which the acquisition of musical capital can lead, ultimately and perhaps by chance, to economic wealth. As an obvious example, those musicians performing the music of Michael Nyman or John Tavener 15 years ago would have found themselves very much on the musical and commercial periphery, and probably working for relatively little money. Tastes change, however, and this music is now commercially very successful. But this is not the same as suggesting that these various forms of capital can be exchanged at will. I might also argue that Nettl's tri-partite division can ultimately be reduced to a bi-partite one, since both "musical" and "academic" authority can be considered as different parameters of cultural legitimacy.

However, my analysis shares with Nettl a belief that the practice of music-making in Western society (and probably elsewhere) requires professional musicians somehow to resolve the conflict between, on the one hand, what they conceive as their "art", and on the other, the financial vicissitudes of an insecure profession. In Nettl's paradigmatic Heartland School of Music the faculty, the administrators and the students trade different forms of coin to achieve certain clearly definable ends. For the musicians I have described these ends are less easily determined. The general accumulation of wealth or the desire for wider recognition are less tangible aims than the acquisition of a university degree or professorship. Having less concrete targets, the strategies these musicians adopt result, at least in part, from the antagonistic relationship between music as a cultural symbol and music as an economic process; and the manner in which they resolve this conflict creates and sustains both their self conception and their individual identity in the wider social world.

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