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Music Performers' Lived Experiences

Theory, Method, Interpretation: Volume One

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Chapter 9

Cross-Genre Musicking in Individual and Collaborative Group Contexts: Lived Experience and Musical Identity

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9 Cross-Genre Musicking in Individual and Collaborative Group Contexts: Lived Experience and Musical Identity

Ruth Herbert and Asha Parkinson

Introduction

The act of musical performance, the stance of the performer and lived experiences of performing are necessarily situated. Drawing on Bourdieu's term *habitus* (1977),[1] ethnomusicologist Judith Becker developed the notion of a "habitus of music listening" that is informed by cultural experience, acquired knowledge and beliefs, describing it as "tacit, unexamined, seemingly completely 'natural' … an inclination, a disposition to listen with a particular kind of focus" (2010: 130). It is equally possible to think in terms of a *habitus of music performance*, understood as a network of influences that inevitably shape subjective experience when practising and performing. What is the impact of one's habitus of music performance on the ways music is subjectively experienced, and on subjective sense of musical identity? What is it like for a performer to negotiate an unfamiliar network of influences, whilst simultaneously being located within their own habitus of music performance?

The focus of this chapter is on the lived experiences of musicians between the ages of 19 and 33, working inside and outside their primary musical tradition and in cross-cultural scenarios where musical traditions intersect. At the time of writing, a number of these musicians were at relatively early stages of negotiating professional performing careers in the music industry, aware of the need to cultivate distinct artistic "voices" and identities to strengthen their public profiles. We discuss the experiences of these musicians in the context of two case studies. The first centres on the individual engagement of undergraduate improvising musicians from western classical, north Indian classical and jazz backgrounds with unfamiliar musics across a period of three weeks as part of a pilot project at a UK conservatoire, designed to afford an immersive exploration of unfamiliar musics. The second centres on subjective experiences of a cross-genre collaboration between Arabic music specialists, classical string players and a jazz quintet.

Unfolding lived experiences of musicking and emerging sense of musical identity are intertwined, mutually informing each other across time in a cyclical process. As lived experiences accumulate, they generate fluid and complex musical identities, which in turn begin to shape lived experiences of performing. In her discussion of the habitus of listening, Becker highlights the inter-relatedness of present-centred (in the moment) perception and action with prior experience (2010:

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130). This aligns with Damasio's (1999) distinction between what he terms "core" and "extended" kinds of consciousness, the latter being the basis of the "autobiographical self". Whilst core consciousness centres on current awareness (the perceptual present), extended consciousness is reflexive; awareness is mediated by prior knowledge, experiences and associations. These distinctions have informed several phenomenological studies of musical experience (Becker 2004; Clarke 2011; Herbert 2011). As the first author has noted elsewhere, subjective awareness can be understood as constituting "the gestalt sum of a network of cognitive, perceptual, emotional and physiological interactions" (2011: 31). It is the interrelationship between unfolding present-centred and cumulative autobiographical aspects of lived experiences that form the prime focus of this chapter.

This understanding of lived experience, as the continual intertwining of unfolding and accumulated encounters with an environment, accords with an ecological understanding of musical experience as a systemic interaction between interdependent variables including individual differences (e.g. prior experience, habitual responses, personality factors, age differences, gender, musical training), properties of music (e.g. musical style, structure, affect) and situational variables (Clarke 2005; Herbert 2011). MacDonald and Saarikallio's (2022) Musical Identities in Action (MIIA) framework reflects this ecological approach, also integrating perspectives from enactive cognition (4E cognition). Accordingly, musical identities are foregrounded as:

> dynamic (constantly evolving … actively performed), embodied (shaped by how music is physically expressed and experienced), and situated (emergent from interaction with social contexts, technologies and culture). Musical identities are presented as fluid and constructed through embodied and situated action.
>
> (MacDonald and Saarikallio 2022: 729)

Thus, although musicians may be referred to or identify themselves via their primary musical tradition (e.g. "classical pianist", "jazz sax player") or cultural role, (e.g. "performer", "composer", "improviser"), both of which constitute what Hargreaves et al. call *identities in music* (IIM) that "form an important part of the self-concepts of professional musicians or, indeed, anybody involved in musical activities" (2017: 4), the musical identity they inhabit may be more nuanced and complex. *Identities in music* may be distinguished from *music in identities* (MII), the latter referring to ways music might be used as resource to articulate or construct identity during the course of daily life (Hargreaves et al. 2017; MacDonald and Saarikallio 2022). For specialist musicians, these aspects of identity overlap as the following case studies will illustrate.

Negotiating and Experiencing Unfamiliar Musical Vocabulary

The second author's (2019) pilot conservatoire study of approaches and attitudes improvising musicians adopt when working with musics outside their primary tradition was informed by her own practice as a jazz saxophonist and composer,

reflecting a developing cross-genre musical identity. Key factors in this trajectory were exposure to a wide range of musics from an early age (in recorded and live settings), informal musical "play" (improvisation) prior to classical training (piano), jazz training (saxophone), and a fascination with different cultures marked by self-study of and immersive listening to Indian classical, Arabic, flamenco and Turkish musical traditions, complemented by self-study of languages (Spanish, French, Turkish, Arabic). At 15, moved by the crisis in Syria, she created an ambitious choral and orchestral work, *What War?*, incorporating Middle Eastern influences and instruments (oud and ney), simultaneously founding a charity, *Voices Beyond Divisions,* to bring young people from diverse cultural traditions together to participate in inclusive, cross-genre music projects. She notes that

> at that time, I loved learning contrasting musical styles/genres to experience the world differently—to try out alternative musical identities, I guess. The sound world of flamenco and Arabic music is very melismatic, flamboyant, outgoing. Those styles felt like moods to me, different worlds to escape to.

Style elements from different musical traditions became increasingly integral to/absorbed in her compositional style, prompting her to found the cross-genre music band *Kalpadruma* in her late teens (Figure 9.1).[2]

Ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl makes a distinction between musics in terms of their density, i.e. the relative frequency (temporal proximity) of what he terms "obligatory musical events" or prescribed "points of reference" (1974: 12)—e.g. harmonic schemas/chord sequences, central tones, opening and closing motifs, sectional markers or signposts. He notes that:

> In comparing various types of [musical] models, we find that those of jazz are relatively dense, those of Persian music, of medium density, and those of an Arabic *taqsim* or an Indian *alap*, relatively lacking in density. Figure bass, and Baroque music in which a soloist improvises ornamentation, are perhaps

Figure 9.1 *Kalpadruma Band* live at Ronnie Scott's 2023. Photo by Jeremy White, on behalf of PressGang Limited. Printed with permission from PressGang Limited

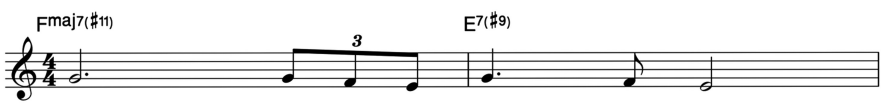
> the densest models of all. Does the density of the model have an effect on a performer's freedom?
>
> (Nettl 1974: 13)

The distinction between musics with relatively high density of fixed elements and those with low density is intended to bypass arguments regarding a composition/improvisation divide, and highlight the potential impact of relative density of fixed elements on performer freedom, allowing Nettl to address the topic of improvisational thinking. The second author's case study takes his observation a stage further, by asking if and how the extent of performer freedom, together with stylistic familiarity, impacts on lived experience—the subjective "feel" of improvisation.

Cognitive Strategies

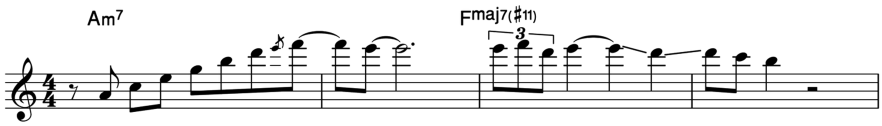
The musicians who participated in the pilot study were all experienced improvisers, albeit with very different musical backgrounds (western classical, jazz and north Indian classical). They received two specially prepared notated musical stimuli from outside their primary tradition, and recorded solo improvisations on each after a two-week period of training (one-to-one teaching by the second author) and individual preparation (supported by audio examples and style guidance sheets).[3] Immediately after the recording session, they were interviewed about their improvisational thinking, while listening to the recordings—an approach previously adopted by Norgaard (2011, 2019) in a study of unconscious and conscious processes and generative strategies adopted by jazz musicians. Reports revealed that (confirming Norgaard's findings) musicians adopted generative strategies (e.g. choosing notes based on harmonic or melodic priority), that such choices were at times volitional (conscious) and at other times spontaneous (non-conscious), the latter only identified by musicians when recordings were replayed.

Interestingly, improvisational strategies drawn from primary traditions influenced creative approaches when working with unfamiliar musical styles. Akin to a second language speaker, the improvisations frequently displayed an "accent" from the improviser's primary tradition. For example, one classically trained pianist (male, 20) interpreted the harmonic sequence in the jazz stimulus hierarchically, structuring his solos around tension and release at macro-level, and preparing melodic dissonances via suspensions and using more ornamentation in dissonant areas of the sequence at micro-level. Example 9.1 below shows this classical approach to dissonance: the #9 in the E7 altered chord is prepared in the previous bar.



Example 9.1 Improvisation, fifth chorus[4]

In the following excerpt (Example 9.2), from an improvisation by a north Indian bansuri player (female, 24), also responding to the jazz stimulus, pre-learnt chord tones of A minor are treated melodically, as a *palṭā* (scale pattern),[5] extending with similar intervals. The player expected to adopt an entirely melodic approach, noting that she was not used to perceiving chords. She also employed pitch bends (*mīnd*)[6] towards the end of the phrase.



Example 9.2 Palṭā (scale pattern) improvised extension[7]

The notion of music as a non-verbal form of thought has been considered by philosopher Jerrold Levinson, who highlights improvisation as one instance of what he terms "intrinsic musical thinking" (2006: 214). What kind of subjective experiences might be behind the generative, improvisational approaches discussed above? What might the lived experience of embodied, musical mentation be like? Do different musical styles and ways of structuring music afford different kinds of conscious experience, for both performers and listeners?

Temporality, Motionality and Narrative

In his classic text, *The Time of Music*, Jonathan Kramer observes that when listening to or performing music "We become immersed in a kind of time different from ordinary lived time … repeatable, reversible, accelerating and decelerating, possibly stopping" (1988: 17). Non-linear music (not shaped by progression towards a goal) may create a sense of stasis—what Kramer terms "vertical time" affording a sense of "being" (present-centred awareness) rather than a sense of "becoming" (awareness of past events shaping future events). By contrast, goal-driven approaches to musical structure generate "horizontal time", affording narrative construction (1988: 55). In the pilot study discussed here, temporality, defined by relative density and motional attributes of different musical styles (e.g. use of hierarchical harmony, melodic development), emerged as another main theme in relation to the lived experience of improvising in unfamiliar musical styles. One of the interviewees noted, for example, that

> Classical [music] is so reliant on movement and narrative and going somewhere. When I was improvising in the jazz idiom I was far more stressed because I was trying to grab hold of, anchor myself and not really being able to because I wasn't sure where a phrase was going. In how I'm used to improvising, you can plan ahead very easily. You can go "I've got *this* theme, I can go to *this* key through this interrupted cadence". I think in trajectories, I struggle with perceiving a harmonic hierarchy in jazz … in classical style

> I'm more comfortable—there is a journey towards a cadence and I respond to that melodically.
>
> (Classical pianist 1)

For this pianist, improvisational agency centres on goal-driven musical motion. Choice of vocabulary ("narrative", "trajectories", "journey") indicate a particular approach to musical sense-making, and shapes the subjective affective tone of the musical experience. The absence of a familiar hierarchical harmonic framework appears disorientating (lack of an "anchor", something to "grab hold of"), and attentional awareness shifts towards a focus on colour:

> When you've got an F maj 7 #11 that just sits there in a bath of its own colour, you think, okay, what do I *do* with this, where am I going? [laughs] And as a classical improviser it was so hard, so difficult mentally—understanding not only where you're going to and where you've just been but also how to indulge more in this colour that you've now got sitting there. It's just this new, this new *freedom* really … it's given me an understanding of how jazz pianists listen.
>
> (Classical pianist 1)

Reduction of density of fixed musical elements in the raga stimulus also increased focus on sounds themselves, leading to a more present-centred awareness, a sense of relaxation and less conscious control of improvisation, evident in the following accounts:

> Improvising on the raga example was surprisingly liberating. It's nice to devote time to one or two notes. I was thinking of notes purely as sound rather than as a function … thinking entirely melodically …I did think more mindfully about how melody could work. It was quite a peaceful experience, just closed my eyes and allowed certain pulls and movement to happen.
>
> (Classical pianist 1)

> Doing the raga stuff is almost like doing a listening exercise; it's non-cognitive listening exercise; it's not based on "oh this note is this interval". It's like "this sounds like this" … it's more based on sound.
>
> (Jazz bass player)

Given the small sample size in this pilot study, it is not possible to make generalised assertions about subjective experiences of time in the performance of different styles—an intriguing area of study which merits further research attention. It should also be noted that this study of improvising musicians' experiences of interacting with unfamiliar musics centred on solo musicking. In terms of subjective engagement, prime attentional focus was on musical style attributes, experienced either individually on one's own or with the project facilitator. This immediate environment was, however, amplified by access to the audio and video examples referred to earlier, which informed creativity, affording extended sense of agency

(Schiavio et al. 2023). As Schiavio et al. put it, "individual musicking is in fact never individual: it belongs to an intersubjective domain" despite the absence of the actual physical presence of others (2023: 555). We next consider extended agency and intersubjectivity in terms of direct interaction in an ensemble context.

Cross-Genre Ensemble Musicking and Lived Experience

In early 2021, a group of classical string players, Arabic music specialists from The Orchestra of Syrian Musicians (formed in 2016), and a jazz quintet met to prepare a large ensemble cross-genre work—a commission awarded to the second author by Jazz South.[8] The jazz musicians were drawn from the second author's own quintet, and she had previously worked with members of The Orchestra of Syrian Musicians, together with the quintet members, in a different context—informal, collaborative jamming of Arabic, jazz and original material leading to performances at several venues. Although the commission, titled *Encounters*, was largely notated, it contained a significant number of "open" improvisatory sections. The rehearsal process occupied a period of two months, prior to a recorded premiere.

Ensemble Interaction: The Rehearsal Context

The opportunity to work on a cross-genre project was clearly appealing to the musicians who took part, apparent in their commitment to learning and internalising the musical material. During interviews, several key motivating factors were identified, including novelty and potential for creativity, as well as the positive affect these factors afforded:

> It's cool because it's new and I want to be doing things that are new and exciting. …I'm drawn to exploring other genres because it brings out creativity in me that I sometimes feel I can't have in classical music. …You can be a bit more "out there", you don't have to fit in [as in an orchestra].
>
> (Classical violinist)

Here, the sound world and the interactive dynamic of the cross-genre ensemble appears to afford a lived experience of freedom in a) extending musical skillset in terms of creative invention/artistic voice; and b) stepping outside a hierarchical orchestral role ("You don't have to fit in") to explore an alternative musical identity. The violinist goes on to emphasise that novelty, in terms of encountering unfamiliar instruments and genres, is central to her engagement:

> I'd never seen those instruments—seeing those in the room was like "Wow! that's so exciting, I could watch them play forever". I find it so exciting to hear people improvising well because I still have the innocence of an audience member who doesn't know so much about those genres, so I can see it from the outside. Classical music, you know the ins and outs, you can't really appreciate it in the same way as if you didn't know anything. If I go to a concert, I find it difficult to sit and listen without analysing everything that's

> going on onstage. When I'm in contact with other genres I still can maintain a bit of that naivety.
>
> (Classical violinist)

From the perspective of this violinist, subjective experience appears dishabituated within the environment of cross-genre musicking; sounds are perceived "afresh"; analytical, critical thought is replaced by absorbed, present-centred awareness and a sense of curiosity. Choice of vocabulary ("innocence", "naivety", "seeing it from the outside") suggests that she values the opportunity to temporarily detach from her familiar (classical) habitus and recapture an immediate, direct involvement in the music.[9] The encounter triggers a dynamic flux between music-making and "self", and a developing attitude towards her potential shifting, emerging, "new" musician identity is evident.

Another motivating factor was challenge, as the following accounts from Syrian and Greek musicians illustrate:

> It was challenging in a good way to learn more about different musics, to put myself in that vulnerable place. I learned from that; I was more comfortable playing with different bands after that experience.
>
> (Riqq and darbouka player)

> *Respondent*: "It's the most challenging thing I've done. I get very stressed with it. I'm used to floating—being able to shift a bit, right and left rather than [makes focused straight-ahead gesture with hands] being very *there*.
> *Interviewer*: "Why do you do it then?"
> *Respondent*: "Precisely because of that"
>
> (Qanun player)

These challenges the performers identify relate to musical genre and ensemble context. While the first account highlights musical style attributes, the second centres on the experiential consequences of engaging with unfamiliar material and inhabiting a different, more prescribed, ensemble role. Spontaneous, equanimous ensemble interaction ("floating") is replaced by narrowed awareness and consciously directed, effortful attentional focus ("being very *there*"). Both musicians value the opportunity to extend their musical skillset and are open to a degree of risk-taking/exposure to achieve it—experienced as vulnerability or stress.

Despite a motivation to engage in cross-genre collaboration, some tensions arose during the rehearsal process, generated by the social dimensions of different musical genres. As the second author notes:

> The classical players were expecting to start at 2pm and finish bang on 5pm and knuckle down for those 3 hours, whereas the Arab musicians were expecting to wander in and be there all day—to try things out—do the preparation in the rehearsal. It was a tension for the string players—I could sense an impatience; it didn't match their notions of professionalism. As for socialisation on recording day—that's something I hadn't worked on properly …

> when it got to break time people would go off in their own little genre groups almost.

The impact of musical background, training and expected modes of preparation on both the rehearsal process and socialisation during breaks is highlighted by the following observation:

> There was already that difference between jazz musicians and classical musicians within the group—particularly the string players would have really practised their parts, being the diligent classical musicians that they are. As jazz musicians we were not as prepared; there's sometimes a less diligent mentality in the jazz community. That phenomenon mapped onto the behaviour of the group. Occasionally it was tense, but that was sporadic and fleeting … in the breaks I tried to be something of a mediator, [and] join the groups together.
>
> (Jazz pianist)

Ensemble Interaction: Strategies and Style

Prior to rehearsals, all musicians received individual notated parts and audio recordings of the complete score (including harmonic schemas, or chord symbols, for the open sections). Additionally, the second author collaborated individually with the singer to co-create the vocal part. During the pre-rehearsal preparation process, classical players worked primarily with notated parts and jazz players used notation and audio in conjunction. However, even though they could read staff notation, for the Arabic singer, percussionist and Greek qanun player, the audio was the main point of orientation, and the principal strategy employed was to internalise the sound of interweaving ensemble parts, absorbing key melodic cues to situate their contribution within the whole:

> All of it was original material, not like The Orchestra of Syrian musicians, where a lot is traditional stuff which we've played hundreds of times before. We grew up listening to these songs! I was nervous because it's something I'm not used to— particularly the notation, having to count bars; you don't want to come in before and you don't want to come in after.
>
> (Riqq and darbouka player)

> I get very stressed with Asha's material. I have to be in a box, to an extent. I can't be out of the box because I will miss my part. I have only one chance … as a traditional musician there is all this freedom and that's difficult to disconnect from. I've rarely got my eyes out of the score; I need to be consciously focused.
>
> (Qanun player)

For these musicians, key to the lived experience of rehearsals was a hyperalert conscious focus, featuring a narrowed attentional awareness (of aural or score-focused

cues). This appeared as an unfamiliar, frustrating, and constricting mode of performance (characterised as being "in a box"), as they expected the pre-rehearsal solo practice to function as a prelude to primarily group-focused music-making during rehearsals.

Ensemble Interaction: Extended Cognition and Flow

It could be argued that a cross-genre ensemble bringing together musicians from different traditions affords a particularly rich site for engagement, given the opportunity for immersive involvement in new sound worlds and musical vocabularies. This was certainly something musicians acknowledged and valued, as the two accounts below illustrate:

> Playing in this is *so* different to everything else I do! It's terrifying, but that's precisely why I do it! Other gigs are similar traditions—oud player and Turkish stuff, Iraqi oud player as well. Even if I don't know the tunes there is a vocabulary there; it's a different dialect—Balkan, Middle Eastern, Turkish—rather than a different language.
>
> (Qanun player)

> Engaging with world influences has been a real process—Turkish and Syrian instruments are not something I knew much about at all. …Finding ways to fit in, that's been satisfying … as a jazz musician you do possess quite a lot of theoretical knowledge, and you've got to be careful not to just stamp on another culture and launch your virtuosic recent practice session all over it.
>
> (Jazz pianist)

Interestingly, whereas the qanun player's subjective response to unfamiliarity is marked by a mixture of fear and exhilaration, the jazz pianist exhibits a more assertive approach ("finding ways to fit in, that's been satisfying"). Attitudes to musical genre and vocabulary also colour lived experience: the qanun player is daunted by the perceived need to speak "a different language"; by contrast, the jazz pianist expects to find ways to integrate existing vocabulary. These cognitive and affective differences play an important role in the ways ensemble interaction unfolds and the improvisation takes shape. In their consideration of the extent of shared understanding between improvisers from different musical traditions, MacDonald and Wilson (2020) highlight ways in which novelty can shape the subjective experience of improvising performers:

> We might consider improvisation less in terms of what knowledge and skills are shared between improvisers, and more in terms of how their ideas and assumptions diverge. It is the musical negotiation that creates breakthrough moments of wonder, excitement and innovation; this negotiation takes place in real time with perhaps some shared knowledge but inevitably significant differences in musical backgrounds.
>
> (MacDonald and Wilson 2020: 95)

Implicit within this description is a framing of creativity as distributed amongst performers rather than "'local' to each individual" (Linson and Clarke 2017: 56). Interaction is informed by each musician's habitus of music performance, i.e. a network of influences, including cultural background and performance practices, the latter in turn informed by long historical trajectories. The notion of a habitus of performance aligns with situated (4E) models of cognition, where cognition is understood as extending beyond the mind rather than being "head-bound"—distributed between brain, body and environment. Divergent creative approaches, rather than shared perspectives, are highlighted by a distributed model of creativity and cognition:

> Each improviser in a collaboration may attend to different aspects of the multifaceted circumstances, perceiving the available affordances in ways that are specific to particular personal associations and that will both overlap with and diverge from those of every other musician in the ensemble.
>
> (Linson and Clarke 2017: 64)

In this cross-genre project, the qanun player was particularly attuned to overall sonic content, and aware of and responsive to opportunities for creative contribution and interaction:

> I like covering holes. In my [traditional] music, if there is another solo instrument I very rarely try to play the melody—to be the leader of the ensemble. I want to add things rather than being in the front. I like being at the back and taking care of ranges, polyrhythms. I don't like being in the front screaming. I'm mostly whispering.
>
> (Qanun player)

Although he does not conceive his role to be soloistic, a clear creative intention is evident in the way he articulates his lived experience of performing ("adding things", "covering holes", "whispering"). Notably, he frequently interacted with the jazz pianist, particularly when both were fulfilling a rhythm section function, as the pianist notes:

> It was really fun to work around the qanun player. That was cool because when it worked it felt like a puzzle fitting together. And I love working with guitarists as well because then you're balancing your role when you're comping—it's relatively free … but on the other hand you're having to be aware of someone else who's occupying a similar role; striking that balance can be really satisfying and definitely conducive to flow.
>
> (Jazz pianist)

The suggestion here is that close co-performer interaction may afford a processual shift in subjective experience and behaviour. The same musician goes on to elaborate this shift and his experience of flow:

> I feel I'm seeing and hearing and feeling all the output of all the musicians on stage and I can choose who to respond to—more of like a bird's-eye

> view. There's a warmth to playing improvised music with other people and communicating with them … connection driven … you get out of yourself a bit. That smaller sense of self seems to be helpful for flow and presence—that sense of compassion or connection to those around you. Interconnection plays into it, like a really enjoyable conversation with a friend.
>
> (Jazz pianist)

This account serves as a first-hand illustration of lived experience in relation to a distributed model of creativity and cognition, and the ways cross-genre music-making can encourage such distributed engagement with co-performers. Attentional focus fluctuates between a broadly distributed awareness of the sights and sounds of the whole ensemble, and a narrower, close focus involving close interaction with individual ensemble members. Sense of self (and boundaries between self and others) recede, replaced by interconnection, feeling part of a larger unit ("you get out of yourself a bit") accompanied by a heightened multisensory experience of sights and sounds. Such an experience suggests a move away from a familiar baseline state of consciousness. Further conversation with the same jazz pianist revealed that flow experiences were a key motivator in his performance career:

> I think what I valued about music performance experience already was the flow state—the brain state that I was able to reach that felt relatively unique from the rest of life. That spontaneous presence. It feels when I'm in that more creative headspace in jazz I'm more likely to be in a state of flow.
>
> (Jazz pianist)

Here, optimal performance affords a means of accessing an altered sense of awareness that is present-centred, free from effortful intention ("spontaneous"), valued as providing a welcome release and fresh way of "being", distinct from everyday lived experience. Interestingly, the pianist stated that he had experienced flow before he knew what it was, but had since developed an interest in flow, mindfulness and meditation practices (particularly the Vipassana tradition), which informed his approach to performance.[10] The importance of such experiential transformations for musicians has been highlighted by Hytönen-Ng (2013) in an extensive interview study of flow in jazz performance. She observes that some jazz musicians "wanted to attain [flow experiences] as often as possible. They were sometimes described as addictive, turning the musician into a junkie looking for a musical fix" (Hytönen-Ng 2013: 21).

The construct of flow relates to experiences featuring an optimal balance between task demands and skill levels where individuals become "so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter" (Csikszentmihalyi 1990: 5). In this cross-genre project, only three musicians used the term "flow" in relation to significant moments experienced during rehearsal and recording, yet a number of them described changes in awareness, attentional focus and sensory acuity not dissimilar to those articulated by the jazz pianist and indicative of what has been termed "group flow" (Cochrane 2017). Empirical studies of flow have largely focused on individual task engagement. However, a developing body of literature explores

flow at group level (Gaggioli et al. 2017; Sawyer 2006), with specific relation to episodes of co-performer interaction (sometimes termed "mutual engagement") occurring during collaborative musical creativity (Bishop 2018: 10).

Group flow and distributed cognition emerge as associated theoretical models that provide particularly insightful vantage points on phenomenological features of cross-genre musicking, emphasising the inevitably extended and embedded nature of performance, in accord with ecological approaches. As observed at the start of this chapter, unfolding lived experiences of musicking and musical identity—the latter understood as a dynamic, evolving and performative phenomenon, "something we do rather than something we have" (MacDonald and Saarikallio 2022: 730)—are inevitably intertwined, informing each other across time in a cyclical process. Having focused on experiential qualities of musicking in individual and group contexts we now consider ways in which musical identity may shape lived experience.

Musical Identity: Beyond Musical Stereotypes

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a stereotype as "a preconceived and oversimplified idea of the characteristics which typify a person … also a person who appears to conform closely to the idea of a type" (OED 2023). Musician stereotypes have centred on the portrayal of musical "types" relating to both genre and instrument, receiving popular circulation through multiple channels—from jokes about musicians, visual representations of them (Gerhard Hoffnung's humorous drawings of classical musicians are a well-known example) to caricatures of musicians within so-called "mockumentary films" (e.g. *This is Spinal Tap*, 1984, featuring a fictional heavy metal band). Musician stereotypes have also received significant research attention, centred on the personality characteristics and profiles of musicians. Anthony Kemp's seminal volume (1996) on personalities of orchestral performers, keyboard players, singers and conductors inspired much work in this field, with more recent work addressing personality traits of popular musicians (e.g. Cameron et al. 2015). As the first author observed elsewhere (Herbert 2019: 243), trait approaches to the study of personality are not without contention as they rely on measures that examine selective identified personality dimensions, operating at a broad level of abstraction. For example, the Big Five Inventory (BFI) centres on openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Additionally, measures rely on self-assessment. Findings, therefore, can be argued to constitute a methodological artefact, shaped, at least in part, by the research technique employed. Interestingly, one recent study of personality traits of singers, pianists, string, brass, and woodwind players found no personality differences across instrumental specialisms (Butkovic and Modrusan 2021). However, it did suggest that musicians *themselves* tended to stereotype other musicians, concluding that "this [study] indicates that there are no real differences in personality traits of different groups of musicians, but that there are only personality stereotypes" (Butkovic and Modrusan 2021: 222). This raises the interesting question about the extent to which individual musicians may be susceptible to and/

or aware of the power of received stereotypes in potentially shaping the subjective "feel" and lived experiences of being a performer, as well as their own performing careers, and whether they strive to move away from such stereotypes.

Acquisition, Musical Trajectories and Musical Identity

As noted in the introduction, although musicians may refer to themselves via their primary musical tradition (e.g. "classical pianist", "jazz sax player"), musical identities inhabited on a daily basis—*identities in music* (MacDonald and Saarikallio 2022) are frequently fluid and complex, defying musical stereotypes.

For the musicians featured in the two case studies discussed in this chapter, primary musical tradition and current sense of musical identity did not always accord. Additionally, methods of acquiring musical skillsets did not always align with expected forms of musical training for primary musical traditions (see Table 9.1).

Whilst, at first sight, the classical violinist's primary musical tradition and current sense of identity accord, for some years her primary way of engaging with music was as an ear-player, exploring a range of musics:

> I was a bit of a weird student at the beginning, I always had perfect pitch. I didn't even know at the time that I was learning my classical repertoire by ear. And I'd pick out TV themes, pop songs on the violin, play around with them. …They [teacher and parents] all thought I could read music, but I couldn't.
>
> (Classical violinist)

It was a change of context (junior conservatoire) that altered her approach to practice:

> I reduced the amount of time I was experimenting. People are always talking about effective practice—"Don't waste time, be focused, target the hard bits". …My practice is a lot more structured now, so I don't often allow myself time to mess around.
>
> (Classical violinist)

The use of the phrase "mess around" suggests that extemporisation and improvisation were not accommodated or valued as part of her classical training. Her pursual of professional work outside classical contexts (TV, musical theatre) reflects her desire for a more clearly creative musical identity. The 25-year-old classical pianist's shift to primarily jazz-based performance echoes this:

> It feels slightly more formal, playing classical music. The criteria of quality are different. There is a sense that what I play should be more pristine in a classical context and more polished. I'm more of a jazz musician as a performer. I like to improvise. I like to collaborate with creatively minded musicians, and they tend to be jazz musicians.
>
> (Classical pianist 2)

Table 9.1 Musical trajectories and musical identity

Primary musical tradition, instrument, age (at time of case study), case study number	*Acquisition of musical knowledge and skills: methods and contexts*	*Current sense of musical identity/musical "home"*
British classical pianist (1), 20 (male). CS 1.	First instance of music as sole focus of attention at ca. 8 years old via assemblies at school. No musical environment at home. Initially self-taught (online and by ear, piecing together pop songs from radio) using paper keyboard. "For me, music became a very visual experience". Self-taught music reading and theoretical knowledge, also using paper keyboard and online recordings. Piano lessons from 11½ years. First heard classical concert at ca. 15. Acquired knowledge of classical repertoire from internet. Scholarship at specialist music school at 16, BMus and MA (classical performance) at conservatoire.	"I prefer to present myself as a musician"—including performing, conducting, composing across different genres.
British (Algerian/ German background) classical violinist, 23 (female). CS 2.	"I was literally born with Classic FM playing in the background …I had to sleep with music". Informal absorption of classical violin repertoire through bedtime listening. Initial exposure to live/recorded music (classical, pop, Algerian) through parents/ grandparents. General group-music classes as toddler. Violin lessons at the age of 6. "Free-range" exploration of instruments, ear-based approach across a range of musics. Reading music later. Practice regimes change from Junior conservatoire onwards. BMus and MA at conservatoire.	Classical violinist working across orchestral, musical theatre and TV contexts.
British classical pianist (2), 25 (male). CS 2.	Piano lessons at the age of 6 (no informal experimentation before). Initial exposure to live/recorded music (classical and jazz) via parents. Notation-based initially. Naturally "improvised a lot with my pieces"; Grade 8, aged 10. "I was quite obsessive for the first few years". Ear-based exploration of jazz, informal transcription in early teens "before I knew it was a thing". Junior conservatoire (jazz), university music degree (classical focus), MA (jazz) at conservatoire.	Jazz pianist primarily, also arranger and composer.

(*Continued*)

Table 9.1 Continued

Primary musical tradition, instrument, age (at time of case study), case study number	*Acquisition of musical knowledge and skills: methods and contexts*	*Current sense of musical identity/musical "home"*
Greek qanun player, 33 (male). Traditional Greek and Ottoman classical music. CS 2.	Lived in Greece, coming to UK aged 24. Classical guitar lessons at 6, qanun lessons in music school at 12. Initial exposure to live/recorded music via parents (90s Greek pop and traditional music in festivals during summer holidays). Ear-based teaching approach, also utilising recordings. Reading music subsidiary and approximate. "The tradition is alive … you're growing up in this". BA and MA (classical focus) in UK.	Eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern qanun player.
Syrian percussionist (riqq, darbouka), 19 (female). Arabic traditional and classical music. CS 2.	Lived in Syria, coming to UK aged 14. Parents professional musicians (singers). Exposure to live/recorded music via parents (mostly classical Arabic music, also western classical music). Bought darbouka at 4, started classical violin lessons at 6. Serious interest in riqq from ca. 12. Performing in bands in early teens, absorbed music by ear through group collaboration and cultural immersion. "There was a lot of music in my city and in Syria in general—you find an instrument in most homes (darbouka, oud) …anywhere you go there is always singing … the tradition is still alive". In UK performed with The Orchestra of Syrian Musicians. Studying for degree in electronic music production.	Arabic electronic music producer/artist.
Indian bansuri player, 24 (female). North Indian classical music. CS 1.	Bansuri lessons at 7. Exposure to live/recorded music via parents (Bollywood, N. Indian Classical). Ear-based approach primarily centred on training with Guru (Hariprasad Chaurasia). "I look up to my Guru – I'll always carry his blessings".	N/A. Currently not performing (working in HR).
British pop, funk, jazz electric bass player, 19 (male). CS 1.	Initially self-taught, preceded by formal classical piano tuition. Conservatoire training, BMus in Jazz. "I started in groove music like funk, then jazz, then more into bop".	Jazz string bass, and electric bass player, composer.

For the electric bassist and Syrian percussionist, primary musical traditions meld over time with other style influences. From a pop/funk background, the bassist incorporates a jazz focus, while the percussionist works with Arabic influences within an electronic music context, drawing also from hip hop and drill influences. Although the qanun player's primary musical tradition and sense of musical identity seem closely aligned, his involvement in the cross-genre project and musical training undertaken in the UK (BA and MA, both with a significant classical focus) indicate a desire to extend his musical skill set.

The 25-year-old pianist's experience of developing his musical identity appears distinct from the musical pathways of the other musicians discussed in this chapter in several ways. Most significantly, he lacked any early environment for musicking, or exposure to classical music. Thus, his methods of acquiring instrumental skills and theoretical knowledge were unorthodox and divorced from any sociocultural context for classical music. Fascinated by watching the primary school music teacher in the corner of assembly hall accompanying hymns, he decided to teach himself piano using online videos. In the absence of an instrument, he made a paper keyboard:[11]

> It didn't seem at that age to be too foreign an idea. The videos had overhead views of the keyboard. For me music became this very visual experience. I could see shapes and replicate them on my paper keyboard. Through repetition I could link sound to paper without an audible experience to it. My early audiation centred round C major.
>
> (Classical pianist 2)

Perhaps most extraordinary is that his contact with classical music began with assimilation of theoretical knowledge (chords, modulation, the circle of 5ths, transposition) well before learning pieces:

> My foundational understanding of music was through chords as these units and how you could build them into harmonic phrases. A lot of the online courses were theory-based, which was a more accessible approach on my paper piano. I began to piece together pop songs from the radio. I used to play around with the chords, arpeggiate them, that's how I learned to improvise.
>
> (Classical pianist 2)

As he accumulated classical repertoire he continued to improvise, using classical harmonic structures:

> If there was a particular phrase I liked, I'd strip it away to the chord sequence and steal it for my own purposes [laughs]. I'd build a bank of these. And so, I could equate classical music I hadn't heard before with language I could understand, although not operating the same in terms of musicians who were native to those styles.
>
> (Classical pianist 2)

For each of these musicians, a network of (sometimes disparate) influences (habitus of performance) informed their musical development and accumulating lived experiences as musicians. Expansions of or shifts away from their primary tradition illustrate the fluid nature of musical identity, with apparent anomalies between style and learning methods contributing to the shaping of distinctive voice and musical intention.

Conclusion

Three decades ago, in his classic text *Self-Consciousness* (1994), Anthony Cohen argued for a greater focus on the role of individual experience within anthropology:

> Instead of conceptualising the self as a replicate in miniature of society, we could begin by paying attention to the ways in which people reflect on themselves, and then see in what ways these reflections are indicative of social and cultural context.
>
> (Cohen 1994: 29)

Cohen's call for anthropology to accommodate subjective experience soon became influential within ethnomusicology,[12] and an upsurge of phenomenologically informed ethnomusicological work has occurred within the last decade (Berger 2014). In terms of music psychology, alongside a burgeoning social psychological literature concerning uses and functions of music in everyday life—including musical preferences, and use of music in identity construction—a growing number of studies have addressed lived experiences of music in relation to a variety of areas, such as music listening and performing (Gabrielsson 2011; Herbert 2011; Hytönen-Ng 2013), and performance anxiety (Papageorgi and Welch 2020). Different disciplines possess different agendas, definitions of and vantage points upon lived experience. For example, phenomenological psychology focuses on experiential characteristics of in-the-moment engagement, whereas phenomenological ethnomusicology is sensitive to the role of culture in shaping individual experience (Herbert 2023). In the introduction to this volume, Doğantan-Dack notes that lived experiences are "not significant merely because they have been experienced, but because they have been infused with the subject's beliefs, values, expectations and desires that continuously solicit meaning construction". This accords with the approach to lived experience we have adopted in this chapter. The performer's habitus—the cumulative sum of past experiences—serves to inform unfolding experience in the present via a cyclical process. As Smith et al. state:

> Experience can be understood via an examination of the meanings which people impress upon it … people are physical and psychological entities. They do things in the world, they reflect on what they do, and those actions have meaningful existential consequences.
>
> (Smith et al. 2022: 28)

We have suggested that experiences may privilege a core (present-centred) consciousness (as in our case study accounts of flow), an extended autobiographical awareness (as in our case study accounts of improvising outside one's primary tradition), or fluctuate between the two.

We end by considering ways in which the musicians featured in the two case studies define their musical identity in terms of their subjective experiences.

Me in Music: Subjective Understanding of Musical Identity

MacDonald and Wilson observe that "Talking about music is a fundamental part of how we make sense of music" (2022: 46-47). How musicians do that talking, they go on to say, shapes their musical engagement. The following five interview excerpts with the musicians who participated in the two case studies we discuss in this chapter function as vignettes showing subjective understandings of musical identity and how that may affect day to day musical experience:

> I feel like my jazz self, my improvising self is really where my musical identity lies—there's a lot more of me in there … showing myself as an improvising pianist that likes to collaborate with interesting creative musicians can be difficult to convey on social media because one post might seem like I'm a jazz musician, others like I'm a classical musician. I'm chipping away at that, revealing more of the complete picture. …I'm sure most people don't feel they sit within one genre.
>
> (Jazz pianist)

> I want to convey *my* connection to music … not to be the messenger of music delivering someone else's expression. …I will not listen to the pieces I'm performing. I want to find my own way of playing, my own artistic voice.
>
> (Classical violinist)

> *Interviewer*: Are there multiple "you's" in music?
> *Respondent*: I think there is one me, and that's also a problem to some. I carry myself everywhere.
>
> (Qanun player)

> In my life there's a very tangible line between pre-music and music. I can remember at the age of 10 not knowing what a treble clef was. …It seems inconceivable to me that there are people who can't remember *not* knowing music … they don't have a life before music. So there's a duality. A large part of my life is seeing myself as a musician but as someone who came to music from the outside and sees music as a little bit of an outside experience. In a way, someone who isn't naturally a musician I guess. It's natural now. I feel much more of a made musician rather than a born musician.
>
> (Classical pianist 2)

> Music is what keeps your identity. That strong connection with music helped me to keep my identity as a Syrian when I came to the UK, fusing different musics, bringing my Syrian and UK lives together.
>
> (Riqq and darbouka player)

Most of the musicians whose lived experiences informed this chapter are at fairly early stages of building professional performing careers. They necessarily balance developing a distinctive artistic voice and profile with the need to earn a living. It has perhaps never been more necessary to negotiate multiple musical identities and skillsets to thrive in the twenty-first-century music industry. Doing so can pressurise ways of being in and experiencing the current musical landscape and potentially impact upon mental health. These musicians' engagement in cross-genre music-making may simultaneously address the need not to be confined by specific musical stereotypes and to keep their lived experiences of music-making vital and meaningful. Of course, other performance environments may afford different contexts for "being-in-the-world" and negotiating musical identity. In this connection, we reserve the last words of this chapter for the qanun player, who speaks about traditional music festivals in Crete:

> What they used to say is that a musician will start playing the moment the sun goes down and stop playing when the sun comes up. This is what would make them professionals—being able to play the clarinet for 8 hours [smiles].

Notes

1 Habitus is defined by Bourdieu as "a system of dispositions [actions and reactions] … it also designates a way of being … a predisposition, tendency, propensity, or inclination" (1977: 214).
2 For further details about Parkinson's cross-genre *Kalpadruma* band, see <https://ashaparkinsonmusic.co.uk/projects/>
3 The notated stimuli were the *alap* of Raga Yaman, an extract from Bernardo Pasquini's piano sonata in A minor and an original chord progression using jazz harmony.
4 Online audio accessible through the Routledge Resource Centre, see: www.routledge.com/9781032403724
5 *Paḷtās* are short ascending and descending melodic patterns, repeated on each degree of the scale, and used as a fundamental practice resource within Indian music to develop technical and improvisational skills.
6 *Mīṇḍ* can be defined as a slow portamento (smooth glissando) from one note to another. It is frequently used as a form of ornamentation in Indian classical music.
7 Online audio accessible through the Routledge Resource Centre, see: www.routledge.com/9781032403724
8 For more information about The Orchestra of Syrian Musicians, see: <https://www.bandofwolves.co.uk/the-orchestra-of-syrian-musicians>. The website for Jazz South is at: <https://jazzsouth.org.uk/>. The cross-genre ensemble line-up was as follows: Arabic singer and percussionist, Greek qanun player, string quintet, jazz quintet (soprano/alto sax, guitar, piano, drums, bass).
9 In a study of the experience of flow in jazz performance, Hytönen-Ng states that performers who are able to "return to a childlike state and be open to ideas" are more likely to experience spontaneous flow states (2013: 48).

10 *Vipassana,* meaning to see things as they really are, is an ancient Indian meditation tradition involving breath control and self-observation techniques.
11 For a short feature on BBC News (2019) where this pianist talks about his experience of learning the piano using a paper keyboard, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEgjamDo9q8>.
12 E.g. as in Cottrell's 2004 study of professional music-making in London.
13 All websites last accessed on 22 April 2025.

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