Reimagining the Undergraduate-to-Career Pipeline in Music Performance: An Autoethnography from the Perspective of a Portfolio Careerist

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Introduction

In recent years, the discourse surrounding music performance education has undergone significant scrutiny, particularly in response to the increasing complexity of musicians' career paths in the 21st century. The traditional conservatoire model – long centered on the development of elite solo or full-time performers within Western art music traditions[1] – has been repeatedly challenged for its limited alignment with the multifaceted, often precarious nature of professional musical life (Beckman 2005; Bennett 2008; Bartleet et al. 2012). Drawing from 19th-century European traditions and institutionalized in North American contexts by the mid-20th century, this model exemplifies assumptions about stable, linear career trajectories that no longer align with contemporary realities. Instruction is heavily weighted toward technical and historical mastery, with less emphasis placed on broader creative, entrepreneurial, or interdisciplinary competencies (Carey and Lebler 2012; Perkins 2013; Burland and Pitts 2014). While this focus has historically been regarded as essential to maintaining artistic standards, recent scholarship highlights the urgent need for performance education to respond more fully to portfolio careers[2], diverse artistic practices, and complex social realities, which characterize contemporary musical work (Bartleet et al. 2012; Perkins 2012; Bennett and Bridgstock 2015).

[1] Although "Western Classical Tradition" is the more commonly used term, the author considers its narrow focus to be problematic and unrepresentative of Western musics, and therefore the terminology of "Western art music traditions" (WAM) will be used throughout the study. This change acknowledges the diversity and historical breadth of musical practices in the West, including liturgical, courtly, symphonic, chamber, and experimental traditions, among others. The singular Western Classical Tradition language risks presenting a monolithic narrative that excludes the variety and evolution within these traditions, and tends to reinforce a narrow canon centered on Austro-German repertoire from the 18th to early 20th centuries. This usage follows the critical perspectives of scholars such as Taruskin (2005), who interrogates the ideological construction of the Western canon, Ramnarine (2011), who applies ethnomusicological critique to Western art music, and Katz (2009), who examines its self-referential development and cultural specificity. This more nuanced terminology better characterizes the complexity of the musical landscape in which conservatory and university curricula operate, and invites discussion of inclusion, canon formation, and professional relevance in music education.

[2] A portfolio career refers to a professional pathway where income and career fulfillment are achieved through a combination of multiple roles concurrently or at different times with potentially ranging importance, as opposed to a single job (Bennett 2012; Perkins 2012; Bartleet et al. 2019). The term was first explicitly presented in business literature in the 1990s (Handy 1994; Templer and Cawsey 1999).

The concept of the portfolio career, in which musicians sustain themselves through a diverse blend of roles including performing, teaching, community engagement, administration, and interdisciplinary work, has emerged as a key framework for understanding the lived experiences of contemporary artistic practice, beginning with leading area scholar Dawn Bennett's application in the late 1990s and through her formative works in the early 2000s (Bennett 2008; Coulson 2010). Today, many scholars[3] focused on music career preparedness and curriculum recognize and advocate for the acceptance and encouragement of portfolio-style work from earlier in musicians' educational lives. This conceptual shift echoes broader patterns of "boundaryless" and "protean" careers observed across creative industries (Bridgstock 2005; Bennett 2008).

However, as researchers such as Bennett (2008), Bridgstock (2011), Duffy (2012), and Bartleet et al. (2019) have argued, this shift in professional expectations has not been matched by equivalent structural changes in most undergraduate music performances programs. Students continue to be trained in ways that implicitly value artistic purity over versatility, mastery of canonical repertoire over exploratory creativity, and individualized achievement over collaborative or community-based practice. Equally, diverse skill sets for work outside of performance, which nearly 100% of graduates who remain in the music industry will undertake, are routinely underrepresented and, in some cases, actively discouraged. As a result, many graduates experience a form of cultural and economic whiplash upon entering the professional world, often feeling unprepared for its demands, disconnected from its rhythms, or discouraged by its precarity. This "training-to-reality gap" is particularly acute in institutions where high

[3] R. Rogers 2002; Bridgstock 2005; Polifonia 2005; Smilde 2007; Bennett 2008a; 2008b; 2012; Bartleet et al. 2012; Perkins 2012; Bridgstock 2013b; Teague and Smith 2015; Scharff 2018; Brook and Fostaty Young 2019; Bartleet et al. 2019; Latukefu and Ginsborg 2019; Tomlinson et al. 2020; Diane Scott 2023

prestige and artistic selectivity have functioned as gatekeeping mechanisms to uphold disciplinary purity at the expense of broader vocational preparedness (Beckman 2005; Perkins 2013).

This growing awareness has given rise to important research on the relationship between music training and graduate outcomes. Bennett (2016), for example, calls for a reconceptualization of music education that centers identity formation and sustainable career building, educating the "whole" musician. Similarly, Bartleet and colleagues (2012) propose a framework for training musicians as cultural leaders: individuals who are not only excellent performers but also capable facilitators, educators, and agents of social change. These contributions underscore the need for curriculum reform, pedagogical diversification, and the integration of entrepreneurship, wellness, and social engagement into the core of music programs (Dobson 2010; Tolmie 2014; Musgrave 2023). Such reforms are necessary not only for individual career success but for the broader resilience and adaptability of the music sector itself.

Yet, even as these reformist discourses gain traction, the field lacks a robust body of literature that centers personal, critically reflexive accounts of educational formation. As educators and researchers, we must not only analyze curricular design and institutional policies but also turn our gaze inward. Autoethnography, as a method that situates personal narrative within a broader socio-cultural and institutional context, offers a powerful means of examining how educational systems shape, enable, and constrain artistic identity and career formation (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011; Chang 2008; Muncey 2010). In the context of music pedagogy, such accounts can illuminate the invisible mechanisms of inclusion, exclusion, encouragement, and resistance that structure students' experiences – particularly those of students who challenge normative expectations or pursue divergent paths.

Despite the well-documented historical and contemporary status of portfolio careers that include teaching being the majority format of work for musicians, post-secondary music performance curricula often underprepare students for the pedagogical roles they are likely to assume. Several studies have observed that even at major conservatories and university programs, pedagogy training is either entirely absent or offered only as an elective, frequently limited to pianists (Doubek 2001; Mills 2004; Carey and Lebler 2012). Yet evidence suggests that approximately 80% of music graduates will engage in teaching at some point in their careers (often as a primary income source) regardless of their original intention to pursue solo or ensemble performance (Bennett 2008; Perkins 2012). This mismatch between curricular design and professional life results in significant gaps in graduates' readiness to enter the teaching workforce, requiring many to seek out mentorships, additional certifications, or learn pedagogical strategies through trial and error (Perkins 2013; Bennett and Bridgstock 2015). The lack of integration of pedagogical skills into undergraduate training illustrates a broader disjunction between educational structures and the professional fields students will actually navigate. Addressing this gap is critical not only for the employability of graduates but also for the health of the broader music ecosystem, which relies heavily on skilled teachers to cultivate the next generation of musicians.

This paper offers such a contribution. Written from the perspective of a musician whose undergraduate training took place in one of Canada's most known music programs, it explores the tensions between formal education and the realities of a portfolio career that spans performance, education, administration, and community-based work. The narrative is informed by, and in part a response to, a recently completed dissertation examining the training experiences of other undergraduate performance graduates. Through autoethnographic reflection,

this paper seeks not only to interrogate the structures and assumptions of elite music education, but also to model the kind of critical self-examination that can deepen our capacities as educators, mentors, and institutional actors. In a field where personal trajectories are often obscured by normative ideals, the act of telling one's story becomes a form of resistance, a declaration of support, and a means of pedagogical renewal. Such narrative inquiry reinforces the call for critical reflexivity in arts education and highlights the growing need for systemic transformation.

Why Autoethnography?

Autoethnography, as Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011, 1) define it, is "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience." As a method, it bridges the personal and the political, blending memoir, cultural critique, and academic research to produce a layered account of personal and collective knowledge. The following narrative draws upon my journey as a classically trained musician, examining how my undergraduate music education shaped my professional identity, and detailing some of the tensions between the career I was trained for and the career I ultimately pursued. The autoethnography therefore emerges as a personal and scholarly response to my recently completed dissertation investigating the experiences of Canadian music performance undergraduates navigating professional life. While this larger study was based on qualitative data from hundreds of participants, this piece turns inward to examine how those same systemic patterns manifested in my own life. My aim is to contribute to a growing body of work that critically reviews music education, using the lens of personal experience to illuminate structural dynamics in training, identity formation, and career

development, and to underscore the value of reflexive scholarship in advancing transformative change within the field.

Methodology

This paper employs a layered analytical autoethnographic approach (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011; Adams et al. 2022) to explore the intersection of undergraduate classical music performance training and the long-term formation of a portfolio music career. While it incorporates evocative and narrative elements (Ellis 2004), its primary aim is not to convey emotion, per se, but to analyze personal experience in dialogue with institutional and disciplinary structures. As such, this work sits at the confluence of analytical autoethnography (Anderson 2006), which maintains a dual commitment to scholarly analysis and insider subjectivity, and layered autoethnography, which recognizes the interwoven nature of self, memory, and the research process itself (Ronai 1995; Chang 2008).

Crucially, this autoethnography did not originate as a standalone inquiry. It emerged as a response to a multi-year doctoral study on undergraduate music performance education in Canada, which included a nationwide survey of over 200 music graduates and in-depth interviews with 12 participants applying inductive thematic analysis with the transformative lens (Braun and Clarke 2006; Mertens 2010; Sweetman et al. 2010). These interviews explored musicians' career pathways, curricular experiences, and evolving professional identities. The resonance of these findings with my own trajectory was profound. As I coded and thematically analyzed participants' reflections (Braun, Clarke, and Weate 2016), I found myself repeatedly drawn to the parallels, tensions, and dissonances with my own training and experience. This unanticipated self-engagement prompted the present autoethnographic inquiry as a necessary

complement to the initial empirical study which served as a means to situate my own experience within the same analytical frame I had applied to others, and to acknowledge participants' vulnerability by sharing my own.

In line with Chang's (2008) emphasis on multiple data sources in autoethnographic work, I draw on a constellation of materials: my own educational documents (transcripts, recital programs, emails, syllabi), curricular data and institutional descriptions scraped from postsecondary websites across Canada, national music and arts labour statistics, and internal writing produced over a twelve-year period in my role as a professional musician, educator, and arts administrator. These writings include unpublished efforts, fieldnotes from workshops I designed and delivered, and mentorship logs (both as mentor and mentee). I also revisit a digital archive of personal materials from my undergraduate studies and early career transitions, which now serve as memory prompts and analytical nodes (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang 2010).

This methodology is consistent with recent autoethnographic scholarship in music education and performance that positions personal experience as a legitimate site of inquiry and transformation (Bartleet 2009; Bartleet and Ellis 2009; de Bruin 2016). As Ellis and Bochner (2000) argue, autoethnography enables the researcher to "write the world differently," using situated personal knowledge to interrogate broader cultural logics and to envision more equitable, inclusive futures within and beyond disciplinary boundaries. The purpose here is not simply introspection, but the cultivation of a critical reflexivity that can challenge dominant narratives of success, prestige, and preparedness within elite conservatory environments.

Ethically, this paper respects the confidentiality and integrity of previous research participants by refraining from citing direct quotations from interviews conducted as part of the dissertation study. However, the thematic contours of their narratives regarding curriculum

rigidity (i.e., performance pressure and the tension between institutional training and lived professional realities) undoubtedly shaped the direction of this autoethnography. The process of writing this paper was itself iterative, involving cycles of reflection, dialogue with scholarly literature, and re-reading institutional data and participant insights through the lens of my own trajectory.

Following the tradition of first-person voice in autoethnography, this paper speaks from a reflexive "I," allowing for narrative presence while embedding personal experience within the language and concerns of the academy (Adams et al. 2015). The intention is to make visible the unspoken norms, exclusions, and resistances embedded in my music education, and to model a form of critical self-inquiry that invites readers to similarly scrutinize the structures they have inherited or perpetuated as performers, educators, and cultural workers. In this way, the methodology aligns with the transformative potential of autoethnography as both a scholarly and pedagogical act (Spry 2001). It foregrounds the lived, contradictory, and affective textures of becoming a musician beyond the degree while insisting that these personal experiences matter in shaping how we imagine, teach, and sustain music careers today.

This approach also resonates with principles of social constructionism, which emphasizes that knowledge, identities, and norms are not fixed but are instead produced, maintained, and altered through social processes, language, and shared practices (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Burr 2003). By critically examining and challenging the implicit messages embedded in music education, it becomes possible to reconstruct more expansive understandings of what it means to be a musician. In particular, this paper embraces the view that fostering a holistic conception of musical practice, one that values performance alongside teaching, entrepreneurship, community engagement, and advocacy, is crucial for cultivating sustainable, resilient careers in today's

cultural landscape (Bennett and Bridgstock 2015; Bartleet et al. 2012). The following section will situate my educational experience, setting the stage for the autoethnography.

Setting the Stage: Inside the Institution

I completed my undergraduate studies at a prestigious music performance program in Canada, an institution known nationally for its high standards, rigorous curriculum, and dominant classical music training. A piano major in the performance stream, I was among the top students in my cohort according to various markers (e.g., maintaining a near-perfect GPA, receiving numerous performance opportunities not extended to all, scholarships). From the outside, I appeared to be thriving, and in many ways, I was. I had a supportive private teacher, led my peers as co-president of our student government, and found joy in a wide variety of musical and leadership experiences. But beneath this surface success, I was already experiencing tensions that would shape the arc of my professional life. In fact, by second year I visited the registrar to discuss options around transferring out of performance because I felt it was restraining. Thankfully I did not transfer out, but I did have several other conversations of a similar nature over the next few years, and wrote my LSATs contemplating law school. At the time I could not understand how to reconcile my love of music (and performance) with other interests even within the arts as a path that included both was never presented to me. When I tried to explore other interests, my teachers often discouraged me, including my involvement in student government and several other experiences that have since proven invaluable to both my personal and professional growth.

Perhaps that's because the program's focus was clear: to produce exceptional classical performers. While electives in other musical styles were available, the core curriculum

emphasized traditional Western classical repertoire (mostly only within the canon at the time, too), solo recital preparation, and ensemble performance. Pedagogy was included only minimally, and only for piano students; other instrumentalists received no formal preparation for teaching. It was not discussed that 80% of performance graduates would teach, rendering the single requirement for pedagogy, even for pianists, as incomprehensive when compared to future career needs. Courses in entrepreneurship, arts administration, or community engagement were entirely absent. These omissions did not go unnoticed. I watched as peers quietly struggled with mental health issues, performance-related injuries, and uncertainty about their futures. The culture was one of unspoken competition, high expectations, and endurance.

The extreme focus on performance and traditional musicianship in my program (and others, as I have learned) created a tunnel vision that suggested there was one path to success, as if this was possible to attain and would be enough to guarantee a fulfilling career. As a young student, it was not easily recognizable as a flaw in the educational structure, after all, it was what I was told was needed to succeed by musical idols. However, in retrospect, I see that by ignoring the broader scope of being a musician, such as career sustainability, professional development, and the importance of skills beyond artistic excellence, the curriculum failed to equip students for the multifaceted nature of music careers. This narrow focus not only perpetuated competition but also pressured students to conform to a singular identity as a performer. I now realize that many of us were shaped to fit into a mold that no longer aligned with the diverse and evolving demands of the music industry.

Even as I benefited from the system's support, I found myself continually pushing at its edges. I requested exceptions to take electives that inspired me and some were granted, although I firmly believe that without extreme perseverance and a stellar track record, they would not have

been. I applied for interdisciplinary opportunities outside the performance stream. My final recital included non-canonical works and lesser-performed composers, a decision met with resistance by some faculty and surprise by my peers who were (practically forced into) performing Beethoven, Bach, and Brahms. My interests in musical theatre, community work, and student leadership were often treated as distractions from my "real" training. Yet these were the spaces where I felt alive, and where my musical identity was expanding, not narrowing.

Redefining the Path: New Understandings of My Musical Identity

Throughout my undergraduate years, I developed a growing awareness that I was being trained for a very narrow and rigid version of a musical career, one that emphasized solo performance at the highest technical level but overlooked the multifaceted and evolving challenges of working in the arts. My professors rarely discussed the economic, social, and professional conditions of music careers. In fact, throughout my studies discussions of careers were rare; in one notable instance a professor candidly stated to a group of pianists in a performance class that only one of the group would "make it," without clarifying what "making it" meant, how it could be achieved, or what options remained for the rest of the group. There was almost no discussion of what came next, except for a tacit assumption that we would all pursue graduate studies. Those who deviated from this path were often perceived as having left the field, even if they remained professionally active in music in various capacities.

Simultaneously, my undergraduate lifespan was marked by genuinely fulfilling experiences. I loved performing, learning new repertoire, collaborating with peers, and immersing myself in an environment where music was a central focus of daily life. The opportunity to refine my craft, study under accomplished mentors, and experience the energy of a thriving artistic community

was exhilarating. There were moments of profound joy and inspiration that I still cherish. However, despite these enriching experiences, the positive moments co-existed alongside a growing unease about the future. While I found satisfaction in my immediate studies, I could not reconcile the narrow professional pathway being presented to me with the broader, more multidimensional career I hoped to build. This dissonance created an ongoing emotional conflict: I felt torn between my genuine love for the work I was doing and my concern that the training I was receiving did not adequately prepare me for the complexities and possibilities of a sustainable musical career beyond the university.

The friction became most evident when I understood that this projected path (solo, orchestral, or chamber music performance only) was not only likely unattainable for most, but also failed to encompass all my interests. The prevailing narrative also seemed to imply that such a career was the one we should aspire to, and I found this difficult. It was not the vision I had for my own future (e.g., being on the road, performing in high-pressure situations frequently, and, most importantly, neglecting other aspects of the music industry and beyond that I was very passionate about, such as arts administration, research, and nonprofit work dedicated to social change.

I chose not to apply to graduate performance programs, despite the pressure to do so. I watched as peers progress from bachelor's to master's to doctoral studies with minimal financial compensation and mounting uncertainty even as they neared graduation from these additional degrees. Although these further qualifications may have further solidified my colleagues' musical identities within the Western art music tradition, many of them have since left music entirely, or continue to struggle with precarity and the same sustainability issues I discovered after undergraduate training. While I, too, have faced struggles, I began carving out my own

version of a music career rooted in performance, yes, but also expanded into programming, community engagement, and arts administration. This transition was facilitated by a self-directed approach that deliberately expanded beyond the traditional music performance academic trajectory: pursuing a business master's degree and actively seeking mentorship and guidance from peers in positions I admired. I accepted opportunities that were not formally accredited within the academic framework and did not take "no" for an answer when it came to experiences I knew would help me grow, both musically and beyond. Similarly, many colleagues I respect carved out niches within or outside traditional music performance careers. These entrepreneurial individuals, who often had to create their own opportunities, seem to be the ones who have "made it," although likely not in the narrow sense that my former professor implied.

Upon reflection, I recognize an incredible injustice that was invisible to me at the time: entrepreneurial tendencies should not be assumed to emerge naturally in all students. Not all individuals possess the necessary resources, support systems, or personal qualities required to challenge the structures around them, nor should they have to challenge such structures. Moreover, it is unfair to expect young students, immersed in highly hierarchical training environments, to intuit the need to resist or supplement their education, especially when doing so might expose them to academic or professional consequences. Some students may not feel empowered or safe to push back while others might not even realize that anything is missing until well after graduation. Entrepreneurship, like pedagogy, is not an innate ability; it must be intentionally taught, modeled, and valued as an essential component of professional development. The assumption that students will independently uncover the need for entrepreneurship and acquire subsequent skills perpetuates inequity and leaves many graduates ill-equipped for the realities of sustaining a career in today's music industry.

For those who did resist the system, resistance took many forms: requesting course substitutions, challenging performance norms, seeking out interdisciplinary collaborations, and advocating for inclusive programming. These were not easy battles. My private teacher, while sometimes supportive of my broad interests, was politically isolated within the department. I learned quickly which faculty members were safe to approach and which were not, and had to navigate the politics of the department to avoid being oppressed by one "side" or the other. Overall, I maintained a public face of "excellence" while privately developing a version of musical identity that diverged significantly from the one I was being trained to embody. For instance, I learned solo and concerto repertoire demanded by my professors that I never intended to perform beyond the walls of the school, but simultaneously kept up my musical theatre interests independently and spent many hours collaborating with colleagues and friends on unofficial projects.

Looking back, I recognize that these early acts of entrepreneurship were not merely personal choices; they were independent acts of necessity caused by an educational model that excluded too many crucial career elements: business and pedagogical training, discussions of career sustainability, inclusive repertoire, mental health, and nontraditional career path experience. At the time, I lacked the language of systemic critique or arts entrepreneurship, but I knew instinctively that the norms I was being asked to accept did not align with my values or my aspirations. Only with hindsight have I been able to understand that what felt like personal friction was in fact the result of systemic gaps – gaps that must be addressed if future generations of musicians are to be efficiently and holistically served. My doctoral studies and my professional experience within the music industry have further confirmed that this is not an isolated experience but rather the dominant story for the majority of musicians. It is also likely

that some of those who ultimately left the field would have remained had the underlying rhetoric and structures been more inclusive of broader career possibilities. This sense of dissonance planted the seeds for the research and advocacy I am pursuing now and forms the foundation for the autoethnographic self-examination that follows.

Entering the "Real World"

Although I did pursue graduate studies after completing my undergraduate degree, I did not follow the expected path of a performance-based Master's degree. Instead, I chose to broaden my focus, pursuing areas that aligned more directly with the evolving actualities of music work. I remained deeply entrenched in music, always, continuing to perform, collaborate, and contribute to my community artistically. Even though I was academically assigned to a public policy and business department, I engaged with coursework in the music department, too, and worked as a collaborative pianist in various capacities for the university and beyond. I was beginning to shape a career that required skills far beyond what my undergraduate education had equipped me for.

The career I built was, and continues to be, rooted in a portfolio model: part performer, part researcher/educator, part administrator/programmer, and part advocate. Bennett (2008) outlines how conservatory training often fails to prepare students for the multi-faceted realities of working musicians, despite the fact that most graduates construct "portfolio careers" comprising performance, teaching, administration, and more. Drawn from my training, I have worked with chamber ensembles, orchestras, and in various concert contexts. Beyond this training, I have worked with choirs and community organizations, created and supported concerts for neurodiverse audiences, managed artistic planning for a major Canadian music festival, and

taught in both formal and informal settings. None of the latter came automatically, and my training had not prepared me for any individual aspect, not the combination of the self-led career. To do this work, I had to seek out professional development that filled in the many gaps left by my post-secondary training. I earned a teaching certificate. I met with musicians and mentors working outside the mainstream. I trained in nonprofit management, arts administration, grant writing, and business practices, much of it while working full-time (or the equivalent given the piecemeal nature of freelance work). Alongside these efforts, there were countless hours spent practicing, rehearsing, preparing for performances, and managing the often-invisible personal administration that accompanies a freelance or portfolio career. Seeking out performance opportunities remained a near-constant task, one that demanded perseverance and strategic thinking and did not necessarily become easier with experience. Sustaining a career in music required not only artistic commitment but a continuous investment of time, energy, and self-direction beyond what was formally discussed during my undergraduate training.

While I am fulfilled by my work today, that fulfillment came only after years of effort to build the tools and language I needed to thrive. I faced, and continue to face, many people questioning my musician identity. I sometimes questioned it myself. I now accept that these doubts were not personal failures, but rather manifestations of broader systemic and social constructs that define what it means to be a musician. Institutions of higher education, where over 90% of professional musicians today receive at least some formal training, wield enormous power in shaping these definitions. By emphasizing narrow models of success (centered almost exclusively around Western art music traditions, technical excellence, and solo or ensemble performance) post-secondary programs not only dictate the projected career path of classical musicians but also implicitly suggest that those who deviate from this path are somehow

"lesser." As Lucy Green (2017) argues, dominant pedagogical frameworks in music education often privilege formal, institutionally sanctioned learning, while devaluing the rich, situated learning that occurs in informal and community-based musical contexts. This hierarchy not only narrows the definition of musicianship but also reinforces inequities by dismissing the legitimacy of musical identities formed outside conservatory norms, impacting not only graduates who pursue portfolio careers, but also musicians in non-canonical traditions whose work is often unfairly devalued simply because it does not pass through these formalized institutional channels.

Musicians frequently experience identity crises when their professional lives do not align with the socially constructed ideals they have been trained to internalize. Within professional and social circles, individuals are often favoured, celebrated, or discounted based on how closely they appear to match established templates of "success." These perceptions are largely influenced by what is projected (such as high-profile performances, competition wins, or association with prestigious institutions) rather than on the full scope of a musician's tangible professional life. Many musicians feel pressure to publicly emphasize only the performance aspects of their careers (regardless of how much or little of their professional time is truly dedicated to performance), de-emphasizing other career components to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of peers, employers, and even themselves. In doing so, they inadvertently perpetuate the same narrow and unrealistic standard that led to these feelings of dissonance in the first place.

In reality, many musicians perform in a wide variety of contexts—not only in "elite" venues and situations music schools taught us to idealize, but also in community spaces, educational settings, multidisciplinary collaborations, and informal gatherings. Often, musicians find these contexts equally or even more fulfilling than traditional stage performances, yet such experiences

are seldom valorized in formal educational narratives. Some musicians maintain portfolios that include thirty or more concerts annually alongside substantial administrative, research, and teaching work, while others focus almost exclusively on performance. Despite this breadth and diversity, those who balance multiple roles are often perceived as "lesser" musicians compared to those who present a singular, performance-focused identity. I have faced such perceptions myself: at times labeled an "administrator" rather than a "real" musician, despite continuing to perform at a high level. It took me years to formalize my position around a blended model of activities and to begin actively advocating for this style of career development. I now work to normalize the portfolio career so that others might struggle less with the same transitions, decisions, and identity shifts that such a career often demands. These assumptions reinforce damaging hierarchies and obscure the fact that all these combinations are legitimate forms of being a musician.

I was once discussing my identity as a musician with a colleague from my undergraduate program. During our conversation, they eventually protested, "But you have a day job!" (referencing regular contract work as a programmer). Surprised, I first pointed out that musicians historically occupied diverse roles (think Schubert as school teacher, Liszt as headmaster and pedagogue, Schumann as newspaper editor, and so forth). This context did not shift their view. I then asked how many concerts they performed annually (though I do not personally believe performance quantity alone defines musicianship by any means). They responded, "About 25." I noted that I performed as many, if not more, each year. Yet they still perceived our situations were fundamentally different. Their reaction revealed a deep-seated assumption: that a "real" musician must earn their entire livelihood through performance alone. My "day job," though also within the music industry and far from a conventional 9-to-5, seemed to disqualify me in their

eyes. This perception was not based on actual artistic output or contributions, but on entrenched cultural narratives. These entrenched narratives may be rooted in romanticized ideals of the "starving artist" or the singularly devoted virtuoso, and they fail to represent the diverse, portfolio-based careers most contemporary musicians now pursue. This exchange underscores how socially constructed notions of legitimacy can solidify into rigid boundaries (e.g., who is granted recognition within a profession).

Each musician must ultimately find the balance of activities (e.g., performing, teaching, administering, creating, advocating) that best supports their artistic fulfillment, financial stability, and personal well-being. Not everyone has equal freedom to make these choices: systemic barriers related to class, race, gender, disability, geography, and other factors shape and constrain the paths available. As Wright (2010) notes, music education systems can serve as mechanisms of social exclusion, privileging those with access to particular forms of cultural capital while marginalizing others. The structures that define "success" in music are often inaccessible to those from underrepresented communities, further entrenching inequities in both training and professional outcomes. Still, within and against these constraints, musicians continuously negotiate and define what a sustainable and meaningful career looks like for themselves. Recognizing this diversity is essential if we are to move beyond outdated models of success and support a healthier, more inclusive musical ecosystem.

Developing my understanding of what it means to be a musician demanded more than artistic excellence; it required critical thinking, communication, leadership, self-advocacy, and a deep sensitivity to the needs and contexts of my communities. These were not competencies I encountered or was taught to value during my undergraduate degree, yet they now form the foundation of my professional life. I did not stop being a musician when I moved away from the

narrowly defined performance track. Rather, I redefined and expanded the term for myself and, in doing so, found a more sustainable and representative version of a musical life that aligns with the profession today.

My training gave me a powerful base in music-making, but offered little guidance on how to live a musical life. The choices I made post-graduation, such as choosing an alternative graduate path, cultivating skills across disciplines, and embracing flexibility, enabled me to stay in music and build a career I love. However, my career has been the result of self-advocacy, adaptation, resourcefulness, and a willingness to resist the limiting narratives of what a musician should be according to some institutional and societal rhetoric. This autoethnography is a call to imagine what music education could look like if it supported not just "artistic excellence" (which is itself a highly problematic term), but sustainability, imagination, and diversity in musical careers.

Synthesis and Conclusion: From Story to Structure

This autoethnography emerged in dialogue with my doctoral research: a broad, qualitative study of Canadian undergraduate music performance graduates and their career pathways. In that work, I documented the systemic misalignments between training and the realities of contemporary music careers. Many participants expressed gratitude for the musical rigour and relationships cultivated in their programs, but they also articulated feelings of unpreparedness, isolation, and dismay at the necessity of independently navigating their professional path after graduation. Their stories echoed and affirmed my own experiences and together we constructed a deeper understanding of what it means to be a musician. It was through analyzing their accounts, layered with my own, that the impulse to turn inward emerged, to trace a personal story of the life of a musician living a portfolio career in an open and vulnerable manner for others to see.

Autoethnography, as Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) describe, is "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience." In that spirit, this project makes visible the often-unspoken dimensions of music career development: the internal pressures, the quiet resistances, the creative problem-solving, and the emotionally charged recalibrations of identity that mark the journey from student to professional. Autoethnography allows us to sit within that complexity, not to generalize from it, but to expand our knowledge around how training cultures shape, limit, or support professional possibility.

As Muncey (2010) and Chang (2008) argue, autoethnography is particularly powerful when situated within a broader social or institutional context. My account is not exceptional; it is illustrative. It invites readers, particularly educators, policymakers, and institutional leaders, to consider how dominant training models continue to marginalize valuable competencies like pedagogy, entrepreneurship, community engagement, and cross-sector collaboration. Adding to the field of critical music pedagogy, this work also contributes to the literature on music education reform by offering an embodied perspective: not just a critique of curricula, but a lived response to it, situated in professional practice.

In terms of contributions to practice, this autoethnography provides an example of how reflective, critical self-narration can bridge the gap between personal insight and systemic analysis. It demonstrates how artistic careers are actively shaped by, and in tension with, educational paradigms. For future research, autoethnography offers a valuable methodological tool to explore the multiplicity of music career trajectories, particularly among those who remain in the field but outside of its traditional pathways. Autoethnography can also serve as a practical means of disseminating personal reflections, reactions, and understandings from researchers

embedded within a field, especially when such insights do not neatly align with the methodologies or research questions of broader studies. This approach is particularly well suited to music, where professional identity is often forged at the intersection of institutional knowledge, embodied practice, and cultural discourse.

More first-person, critically situated accounts are needed to diversify our interpretation of what it means to be a musician today. Ultimately, evolving the ways we document and appreciate musicians' lived experiences is essential if we hope to build a more inclusive, sustainable, and truthful vision of the musical professions. In telling my story, I hope to affirm that diverse, evolving pathways in music are not only valid but vital to the future of our artistic communities.

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