Musicianship – discursive constructions of autonomy and independence within music performance programmes

Nadia Moberg & Eva Georgii-Hemming
School of music, theatre and art, Örebro University

Abstract

Autonomy and independence are key concepts in higher education. Skills and competences viewed as necessary for a flexible and lifelong career have become increasingly centred on employability and demands for market adjustment. This article addresses the issue of how autonomy and independence are understood within a specific disciplinary context. Drawing on interviews with teachers and students, the paper aims to investigate discursive constructions of autonomy and independence within music performance programmes in higher education. We establish that autonomy is articulated primarily as actions of expression and communication, both musically and linguistically. Independence is primarily articulated as a detachment from teachers as well as independence from prior musical interpretations and sheet music. On the basis of the findings we argue that autonomy and independence mainly involve an alignment with current societal and market conditions, which suggests a rather limited latitude in terms of possible actions and positions.

Background

Drawing on interviews with teachers and students, this paper explores the discursive constructions of *autonomy* and *independence* within music performance programmes. The specific objectives are (i) to analyse and explain students' and teachers' notions of autonomous and independent musicianship within music performance programmes and (ii) to elucidate the perceived role of education in fostering autonomy and independence. Autonomy and independence are related; however, we use both concepts as we aim to capture both *freedom to* act independently and *freedom from* dependence.

Problems regarding autonomy and independence are linked to profound changes occurring within European university and higher education structures, governance and organisation during the last two decades (EHEA, 2017; Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, Anand Pant & Coates, 2016). The Bologna Process and broader global trends in which education is embedded have led to increased concern about the demand for market adjustments (Gaunt & Papageorgi, 2010; Hansmann, Jödicke, Brändle, Guhl & Frischknecht, 2017; Sursock & Smidt, 2010). Scholars have, for example, criticised the ways in which the value of higher education is framed in response to economic concerns and neoliberal values, instead of advocating education as a free development of the person in the Humboldtian sense (Ball, 2004; Moore, 2016). In relation to employability, student autonomy and independence have become two key concepts which have been emphasised within higher education. Universities are increasingly focusing on skills and competences needed for a flexible and lifelong career within a profession or occupational domain (Georgii-Hemming et al., 2016; Krücken, 2014).

Moreover, a series of political reforms have placed demands on vocational programmes to become an integral part of higher education and create stronger links between teaching and research (Ek, Ideland, Jönsson & Malmberg, 2010). In Sweden this trend towards 'academisation' – among other things – has meant that students undertaking all forms of bachelor and master programmes must write or conduct an 'independent thesis'. The requirement to do so creates tensions between the focus on scientific and professional practice (Georgii-Hemming et al., 2016; Hazelkorn & Moynihan, 2010; Moberg, 2019). In other words, as institutional traditions and new requirements meet, this leads to a struggle over time and space between engaging in activities linked to different forms of knowledge. It is likely that this tension is heightened within higher music education given the demands and specific requirements placed on the music profession.

There are also rapid changes within musical and cultural activities in society more generally. As a result, the future labour market for music performance students is characterised by divergence in musical styles, context and engagement (Georgii-Hemming et al., 2016; Tregear et al., 2016). Musicians' careers include roles as performers, managers, producers and educators (Bennett, 2016; Gaunt, 2016; Myers, 2016). Institutions must prepare students 'for a large diversity of career paths and enable them to broadly contribute to society' (EUA, 2017, p. 2).

In Sweden and other countries, curricula and policy documents state that students must be able to adapt to new contexts, to formulate and solve problems, to make assessments and decisions, and to integrate their knowledge in different contexts. They

must also be able to develop new forms of personal expression and take responsibility for their ongoing learning (European Commission, 2017; Su, Feng, Yang & Chen, 2012; Swedish Code of Statutes 2006:173; Swedish Code of Statutes 2009:1037). To succeed as professional musicians, music performance students thus need to develop *both* domain-specific and generic or transferable skills. Autonomy and independence are thus two main competencies which are expressed as pathways to developing such skills. These competencies have been relatively underexplored in higher music education – both in terms of students' and teachers' understanding of them as well as within the academic literature.

Previous research

In literature on higher education, concepts of autonomy and independence have so far mainly been discussed in relation to the selection of vital key competencies in view of current societal challenges and labour market requirements (Davies, 2017; Rieckmann, 2011). Studies focusing on autonomy and independence as transferrable skills have mainly been concerned with issues around assessment of students' learning outcomes in higher education programmes (Blömke, Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, Kuhn & Fege, 2013; Minors, Burnard, Wiffen, Shihabi & van der Walt, 2017; Tremblay, Lalancette & Roseveare, 2012). With respect to university curricula, there has undoubtedly been a shift towards more instrumental and measurable forms of knowledge, and much has been written about how the logics underpinning higher education institutions are currently driven by New Public Management ideology (Broucker & De Wit, 2015; Georgii-Hemming, 2017). As a response to this development, studies have argued for the need to link critical reflection skills, independent thinking and the potential for student participation in societal debates on topics related to the profession (Harland & Wald, 2018; Kincheloe, 2008).

Within music research, most studies have concentred on music students' autonomous and independent learning within the context of the master-apprentice tradition and one-to-one tuition (Carey, Harrison & Dwyer, 2017; Long, Creech, Gaunt & Hallam, 2014). Previous studies, such as Johansson (2013) and Burwell (2013), emphasise that qualities of independence are vital to students' learning throughout their careers. Some of the issues emerging from these findings relate explicitly to how reflective practice can increase undergraduate students' learning autonomy and stimulate their development as independent musicians (Burwell, 2013).

In reference to how to better foster independence, research also addresses students' self-regulating strategies for independent music practice (Jørgensen, 2000; Nielsen, 2001, 2004) and teachers' approaches to the development of individuality within the Western classical music tradition (Hultberg, 2000, 2002; Laukka, 2004). For instance, in their research on teachers' beliefs about effective instrumental teaching, Mills and Smith (2003) report that the development of students' individuality is among the highest ranked qualities in higher education.

Although this research has tended to focus on learning strategies, much less attention has been paid to the characteristics of autonomy and independence *per se*. What is currently lacking in research is studies at a conceptual level concerning the qualities and discursive constructions of autonomy and independence –within or outside disciplinary contexts.

Methodology

Data presented in this paper is drawn from a larger ongoing study (DAPHME[1]) and an associated doctoral study (Moberg, in progress), both focusing on how processes of academisation affect higher music education across Europe[2]. Adopting a broad critical discourse-study approach, we investigate and seek to demonstrate how autonomy and independence are constructed within higher music education in Sweden. We primarily take our inspiration and analytical categories from work developed by Fairclough (2003, 2010, 2015) and Wodak and Meyer (2016). In their approaches the analysts oscillate between texts and wider social structures. This allows us to approach the question of why autonomy and independence are constructed in specific ways at micro and macro levels. Subsequently we seek to explain how autonomy and independence are understood within music performance programmes, considering why autonomy and independence are constructed in particular ways.

The data consists of semi-structured in-depth interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2017) with teachers (n = 17) and master students (n = 6) from four different music academies in Sweden offering music performance degree programmes at master level. The students all had a classical music orientation, while all but one teacher had a background in

classical music. By choosing participants from different music academies, we could avoid generalising from statements which may have been limited by a specific institutional discourse.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were chosen since these had the potential to generate data-rich accounts focused on the respondents' opinions and interpretations. The interview guide drew from specific themes linked to DAPHME's conceptual framework, which is based on exploring notions of competence, knowledge, (artistic) research and views on the functions of these within education and the music professions. Interviews with students were conducted by Nadia Moberg, and interviews with teachers and leaders were conducted individually by Eva Georgii-Hemming or her colleague Karin Johansson[3]. Each interview lasted 50–90 minutes and was audio-recorded. All interviews were fully transcribed, and the interview transcripts were subjected to thematic coding, using the data analysis platform NVivo. For this paper, the data from all interviews were read together. However, while the main focus of the study was not to conduct a comparative analysis of the students' and the teachers' accounts, we remained open to differences between them as groups since there could potentially be important insights to be made in highlighting these.

We use the term 'discourse' to capture language use as a social practice (Fairclough, 1992) and consider discourse to be 'a cluster of context-dependent semiotic practices that are situated within specific fields of social action' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, p. 27). In line with Fairclough (2015), we examine discourse in a multidimensional way and seek to describe, interpret and explain the relationships between texts, interactions and contexts. The approach assumes a dialectic relationship between discursive acts and situations, institutions and structures surrounding these acts. While discourse bears the marks of social structures, it simultaneously aids in stabilising or changing these structures. This view has analytical implications as the in-depth analysis of texts is accompanied by an investigation into how the texts are embedded in institutional practices and conditions in a recursive manner (Fairclough, 2015). In other words, to analyse discourse entails investigating relationships between concrete language use and wider social structures including integrating historical information 'in which the discursive "events" are embedded' (Wodak et al., 2009, pp. 7–8). The analysis therefore involved situating individual statements within Swedish music institutions' practices and traditions as well as changes in higher education.

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3   Prof. Karin Johansson, Lund University, Malmö, Faculty of Fine and Performing Arts. Data is used with her consent.

As indicated above, the interviews focused on how respondents understood and expressed notions of knowledge and competence. However, different perspectives on autonomy and independence also became salient in our conversations. The analytical strategy sought to identify patterns and contradictions in constructions of autonomy and independence. Following thematic analysis, an in-depth textual analysis of the relevant themes was conducted with analytical categories such as assumption, collocation, intertextuality, modality and representation of social actors and events (Fairclough, 2003) guiding us towards an analysis of how autonomy and independence are constructed. Thus, the in-depth analysis did not cover all data, but rather focused on relevant themes and specific utterances where explicit and implicit ideas surrounding autonomy and independence were salient. Our main focus was on analysing what autonomy and independence means within these institutions and on whether (and how) the education can be seen to support and/or develop autonomous and independent musicians.

Findings

Exploring discursive constructions of autonomy and independence, we found that the articulations are structured primarily around two areas: where *actions* correspond with acting autonomously and *positions* correspond with taking an independent position. 'Actions' refer to competences, including skills, and are broadly defined as cognitive, motivational and social dispositions that can be increased through learning. They are assumed to be multidimensional and specific to the field of study but are also understood as specific to higher education in general (Shavelson, 2013; Zlatkin et al., 2016). 'Positions' refer to perceptions of where musicians need to locate themselves and be located by others so as to be conceived of as independent musicians. Positions involve strategies deployed to become independent musician subjects which may develop through, or be hindered by, the education. In the following section we explain what characterises autonomous and independent musicians based on how the concepts are constructed in the teacher and student interviews.

Acting autonomously

Craftsmanship is a competence that is largely taken for granted. Students and teachers equally conclude that instrumental skills are the main prerequisite for functioning as an autonomous musician. Mentions are made in passing pointing out that musicians need

to be 'super' and handle their instrument in as 'unhindered' a way as possible. 'Purely professional skills' are, in short, essential to 'everything you want to accomplish'. This constitutes the foundation on which a musician subsequently can build an autonomous artistry and career. However, there is more to this. To be a good musician in terms of being an expert on an instrument is no longer enough. This view is confirmed by the literature (Bennett, 2007; Johansson 2012).

In the interviews there is emphasis on verbal expression and communication as important components of autonomous musicianship. Amongst the students this is mainly, but not exclusively, implicitly stated, whereas the teachers articulate it explicitly in many different ways. Ranging from arguments concerning musicians' abilities to participate in public discourse, funding opportunities and arguments concerning stage presence, verbal expression represents a cornerstone of several different aspects of the profession. Various reasons were thus given as to why verbal expression and communication are key to autonomy. One explanation is that it enables a person to communicate with backers, to apply for funding to and act as a marketer. The importance of 'entrepreneurship' and public relations is underlined. A teacher explains:

> (…) they will be forced to speak about their instrumental and artistic activities. In some ways being able to express it, write funding applications (…) (Teacher)

The statement implies that labour market conditions lie behind this assumed fact, and there is no social actor, either individual or collective, behind this compelling force. Students, too, conclude that you have to be able to 'promote yourself' and to 'write enticing sales texts'. Such aspects are described as time-consuming, as a rather demanding means of reaching the purpose itself. Albeit primarily not expressed in terms of communication, these aspects of musicianship are recurrent:

> …what we spent the most time on when I played with the quartet was… like sending out emails and… I just want someone to do that for me, because it's really difficult. And talking about taking up time, out of everything that takes the most time. To arrange gigs. (Student)

While expressed as necessary undertakings, these activities are primarily described as additional tasks, performed 'on the side' of a musician's main occupation – or as in this student's case, preferably carried out by someone else. Simultaneously, there are some reservations made concerning musicians' abilities to verbalise and communicate

their reasoning, articulated as something to which they are 'unaccustomed' or 'not used' to. While communicative actions and verbal expression are described as significant aspects of autonomy, articulations reveal that this area poses a challenge on both an individual and an educational level.

Nevertheless, a regular notion is that musicians need to be able to explain themselves and what they do both verbally and in writing. They need to 'master tools in order to fight for themselves', as one teacher proclaims. In relation to this there are also ideas about improved opportunities to argue for one's raison d'être and assert one's position as a musician in society. Among the teachers in particular, the ability to argue is emphasised:

> ...they can't leave education and just 'play nice', but they have to be able to explain what they do, give coherent arguments for why they should exist, how they want to work and, yes, why it's [musicians and music] important in society, nothing can be taken for granted. (Teacher)

Fighting for themselves and arguing for their own existence are examples of statements where music students are positioned as 'underdogs'. This is not only a question of one's own survival; it also describes a collective mission where classical musicians in general ought to be able to legitimise classical music and musicians' role in society. On one occasion a teacher makes a comparison between students in higher education in general and music performance students. By using reported speech to illustrate how music performance students may feel ('I can only do this' or 'everyone else uses such fancy words'), the teacher expresses the wish that higher music education should contribute to a 'breadth' so that music students do not feel inferior to students on other degree programmes. Furthermore, some statements can be understood as attempts to redefine what a musician is, ought to or needs to be. Illustrative of this is when a teacher talks about a perceived misconception among musicians that many musicians thought of as successful during the course of history have, in fact, been capable of asserting themselves not only musically but in other ways as well:

> In all honesty, we have had a rather strange romantic idea that it's enough to play as a musician and then... but that... if we look back on the romantic era, there were no puppets, the great composers and musicians could really speak for themselves, be seen, be heard and argue for themselves. I think there is a misconception among our current musicians, actually. (Teacher)

This presupposed idea of craftsmanship as a sufficient part of musicianship is articulated as one held by many musicians, but nonetheless portrayed as false. Not now, nor previously in history, has this been enough, the teacher asserts with a high degree of certainty. Also mooted is the idea that verbal abilities make one a good artist and presenter, since those who can verbally articulate their practice are in a better locus to comment on and explain artistic processes and choices. The statement above, understood in the context of the full findings, suggests that verbal competences have a legitimacy based on the discipline's own tradition. An increased focus on verbal competences is thus not explained primarily by influences from an academic context but rather as a rediscovery of something which musicians used to master in the past.

Verbalisation seems to constitute both a reflective tool in musicians' own knowledge formation and a tool for influencing audience experiences. One student talks about the musician's duty to present music to an audience in ways that make it both available and more interesting. This is one trait that separates a good musician from musicians who 'only play':

> …it's really my job to… present this music so that they understand […] You have a great opportunity to… make it interesting as well. And well, moving. Better. (Student)

Illustrated here is an idea that verbal expression can enhance the experience for listeners, even make the music better. Such abilities are portrayed here as expected of a truly autonomous musician. Furthermore, verbal expression and communication are articulated as a matter of democracy. By having such abilities, musicians are given opportunities to become subjects. It enables them to gain their own voice, to participate in public discourse and to problematise their own art. An illustrative expression concerning the importance of verbal confidence is articulated through a statement about the fear of 'the silenced musician':

> I really think it's needed in the future… musicians who can articulate, who can… so we become part of the public discourse. I think it's more common to have articulate directors, actors, writers… visual artists are usually much better at problematising their art and putting it into a broader context. I think there might be a change when musicians, too, can talk about their artistry in a broader context. I think that will mean a lot to the field of music. (Teacher)

A desire for more eloquent musicians was uttered in the interviews and placed in direct contrast to professionals in other artistic fields. The statement above highlights an undesired difference which preferably should be extinguished. Musicians generally need to learn something which other artists have already mastered. Correspondingly, there are examples where students articulate an appreciation in relation to eloquent musicians they have encountered during the education. One student describes a situation where a person who was 'a practising musician who had also reflected a lot' shared their thoughts and concludes that it was very interesting.

Finally, there is an idea that different groups and associations employ different kinds of language that music students need to be able to manage. Since musicians find themselves in different constellations and at various events, they need to be sociable. Therefore, an autonomous musician needs to be able to adapt to different settings and people:

> They get some tools, but there are a lot of demands put on musicians, not just in terms of playing: you have to have a pretty firm gaze and talk to people without looking scared when not holding your instrument. And there are some students here who have a long way to go. (Teacher)
> ...social skills are extremely important, especially as a freelancer, being able to carry yourself and adapt to different… situations and different social circles. (Student)

While artistic uniqueness and originality are emphasised as desirable qualities for musicians (which we will see examples of under the next heading), there are also vital ideas about adapting and being able to act as a chameleon in some sense. We conclude that the kind of actions which autonomy is constructed around primarily have to do with expressing something and communicating – musically, but also via language. This is articulated explicitly mostly by the teachers, but more often implicitly by students. Musical craftsmanship and communication are thus paired with verbal expression and interaction in constructions of autonomy.

Holding an independent position

Independence as a state of being, in these interviews, is expressed via different subject positionings. Achieving independence as a musician means reaching a point where reliance on, or control by, others is an exception. Independence is predominantly articulated as a detachment from teachers and as an absence of external constrains

imposed by them. Secondly, it is about independence from prior musical interpretations by others. The positionings of independent subjects are primarily articulated in relation to teachers, other musicians, traditions and sheet music. The desirable position is the independent artist with a personal expression and unique profile.

References to the 'old tradition' are made, referring to a master-apprentice relationship where teachers are seen as musical decision-makers and some kind of knowledge reservoirs (cf. Bennett, 2008). Yet it is worth noting that when 'tradition' collocates with 'old' it can often be interpreted as an attempt to reinforce it as an outdated or 'backward' tradition/relationship. Both teachers and students observe that such ideas are still present to some degree. A student describes that there are teachers who '*hang on to* this master-apprentice tradition', while a teacher states that it '*lands* on our current students'. Taken together, these statements convey tradition as a physical thing, something which can be grasped or in some accidental way falls down upon students. In the first statement teachers actively hold on to it. In the second there is no action performed; the tradition is portrayed as a force in itself.

The 'old tradition' is also depicted as constituting a barrier to students' development. Students talk in critical terms about how they easily come to view the teachers' ideas as 'the truth', how there is often a 'right way' of doing things, how they are 'not encouraged to think freely' and how they have to 'ask for permission'. For such reasons, they are critical of these conditions. Teachers speak about these conditions as well and identify them as an area for educational development. In one statement a teacher claims that 'students often think like their teachers', another uses reported speech to mimic teachers who say things like 'you must play this way' or 'if you do as I tell you, it will be fine', while a third remarks that students need to do 'not only what the teacher says'.

While it is referred to as an old tradition, it is clearly still a concern and a highly extant part of the educational discourse. Both teachers and students are critical of master-apprentice relationships that are seen to foster dependence as opposed to independence. In one teacher's critical statement about concert posters we see a particularly clear example of how a teacher and a group of students are positioned:

> You know we even have some concerts... where you can see posters with 'Clarinet professor blah, blah, blah presents his pupils' at a lunchtime concert. Then you're still there, suddenly. (Teacher)

This statement can be understood as an abstraction over a series of social events, a representation of an institutional concert culture. The poster, which serves to inform a potential audience of an upcoming event, is here re-contextualised as an illustrative example of a problematic relationship. In the poster the action is performed by a professor, and the students are aggregated and presented by him. The main actor is the teacher, positioned as an indispensable hub. Furthermore, the teacher is referred to by both a professional title and his proper name. Meanwhile the students are relegated to the background. Referred to as '*his* pupils' the students are thus placed in a relation to the teacher where they become defined as a particular master's progenies.

Though there are numerous manifest critical perspectives voiced on the old tradition by both students and teachers, some statements are contradictory and reveal an embeddedness of ideals related to this particular master-apprentice relationship. For example, one teacher speaks about a 'very good teacher' and refers to him as a 'Papa Percussion'. The statement suggests a very close relationship, involving a dependent position for students emphasised through the use of the paternalistic metaphor. Furthermore, there are examples where students support their claims by using argument from authority, legitimising their claims by referring to the teachers' statements:

> It's harder to get a job because we're more people fighting over them and the level is much higher. Our teacher told us that when we had a lesson… (Student)

The student thus argues that something is true because the teacher, in this case treated as an authority, said so. The interviewees generally assert that independent musicians make their own decisions and that they should stand in a position where nothing interferes with musical interpretation and expression. From the students' perspectives, a unique and personal profile is primarily developed through their own endeavours. Several students observe that it is not supported by their education at this point in time. Illustrative of this point is the comment that there is 'little room for artistic freedom and personal expression'. Simultaneously, students are in agreement that 'you are expected to stand for something unique, a personal expression'. One student remarks that it is important to know 'what can separate me from others', whilst another claims that 'you become crazy if you are being moulded into a form'. In short, you need to have your own opinions, make your own decisions and not rely on others. For instance, one student critically describes how 'many' students approach a new piece of music:

I notice that there are so many people who, as soon as they get a new piece, check a recording directly to see how someone else does it and so on. And that's the fastest way, but to sit down and to look at the score and think 'how could he have thought about this, and what could I do with this'... (Student)

The statement conveys a negative view of musicians who work in imitative ways, rendering the independently interpreting subject as an ideal. Amongst teachers, developing a unique and personal expression is not explicitly emphasised to the same extent as among students. More commonly, teachers speak about 'awareness' of a musical position. This awareness is primarily built around insights into one's musical influences, a knowledge of where you belong in the musical field. However, one teacher mentions specific courses where the main objective is for students to 'find' their own artistic expression, 'find each individual's artistic uniqueness'. Yet another teacher talks about freelancing and states that 'you need to have your own profile'. The teacher continues:

...we see that those who have made it are those who have dared to specialise their knowledge. (Teacher)

As for the above statement, creating a personal profile is a question of courage. For students it is primarily a question of developing something through acquiring knowledge and skills. More often still, at the heart of the teacher's statements is the 'awareness' referred to here: 'more required now than ever is an awareness of who you are as a musician'. All in all, teachers construct a position where independence means that musicians have insight into their own musicianship; a good self-perception of what musical space they inhabit. Similarly, other teachers note that 'you must have an awareness of your place', while another claims that students need to 'become more aware of their position'. There are also statements about an 'understanding of who you are' and the need to 'understand yourself in relation to other musicians'. One teacher speaks about a course:

... the course ends with that they [the students] describe (...) their own musical context. That they [show they] understand how and what shapes their musical references as well as understand what their references are. ... Why do I think this drummer is good, or that violinist ... like putting themselves in a musical context that is. (Teacher)

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The emphasis amongst the students is on developing a personal expression and learning how to make the music 'your own'. In other words, it is a matter of gaining new subject knowledge and skills. The teachers, on the other hand, talk about awareness, about contextualising yourself or understanding something which is already there, in place. This is thus rather about gaining personal insight. To put it differently, the students seem to demand that their education offers them ways and knowledge to construct themselves as unique musicians, while the teachers' articulations convey an essentialism where the role of the education is to offer them tools to discover an already existing musical essence.

Discussion

In constructions of autonomy and independence within higher music education we see that teachers and students have similar ideas about what autonomous and independent musicianship means. However, they talk about this in slightly different ways. While the teachers mostly express ideas around aspects of autonomy in terms of transferable skills needed for successful performance in different professional situations and contexts, the students instead talk about specific skills linked to concrete tasks. Our analysis demonstrates that musical qualities are essential, but it also reveals that verbal competences are increasingly important prerequisites in order to develop as autonomous musicians.

The data supports an assumption that language skills have taken on the role of a new craft. This is partly advanced by the actions needed because of the demands of the labour market. These demands link to changing structures of funding for music as well as labour market saturation. As full-time musical jobs are becoming increasingly scarce, classical musicians and educators are increasingly expected to handle marketing, business, community engagement and self-driven musical projects to meet market demand. Entrepreneurship curricula are now in place at most music conservatoires globally (Moore, 2016). However, in our study there is no explicit evidence of criticism or scepticism against an increased focus on language skills and market adjustments within education.

This research supports the idea that being unique and having a personal expression are seen as vital for developing as professional musicians, as suggested by previous findings (Gaunt 2016; Johansson, 2012). To successfully compete for jobs, it is not enough to

have the musical craftsmanship and knowing the tradition; a personal profile is an important selling point. This can be understood as an aspect of a neoliberal society in which you are your own brand (León, 2014) and where the internal organising logic of neoliberalism views competition as a powerful stimulus for driving quality.

We argue that this implies a challenge in a profession where musicians commonly act as bearers of tradition. A mantra of personal expression and uniqueness potentially creates tensions: to what degree is uniqueness a desirable characteristic of classical musicians?

Looking more carefully at the constructions of autonomy and independence, it is possible to question how far they actually reach in music performance institutions. In some sense, autonomy and independence means adapting to different social and musical contexts, meeting the needs of the labour market and following musical traditions. Our study points to how alignment to current conditions constitutes a large part of what it means to be an autonomous and independent musician. Independence, then, does not mean breaking norms and traditions or questioning educational systems or market principles, for example. Autonomous and independent musicianship therefore suggests a rather limited latitude in terms of possible actions and positionings. Furthermore, this study has found that this trend is not problematised to any great extent. Given these findings, it would be of interest to further investigate the ways in which this restricts the (rhetorical) principle of artistic freedom.

The findings of this study raise questions about the role of (music higher) education in supporting students' development of autonomy and independence. Concrete learning activities geared towards these expressed aims were not the focus of the interviews. It is, however, worth noting that teachers point out that students must reflexively become aware of who they *are*, what musical preferences they *have*, and where they *are* located in the musical field. In other words, developing autonomy and independence is primarily a question of becoming aware of existing talent and identity rather than being inspired by new influences to develop artistic freedom. This suggests that the role of education is mainly to assist students to become aware of their strengths and weaknesses in relation to future challenges. We argue that central to this conception is the idea of the self as authentic and as something to be discovered and expressed rather than developed and contested.

In addition to market demands, we argue that one reason for the intensified focus on language skills is the process of academisation. As an integral part of higher education,

study programmes must adapt to regulations and organisational structures (Ek et al., 2013). Academisation also demands stronger links between research and teaching, which may create a gap between education and profession. Academisation may be considered useful by the profession if it proves the added value of performing arts education. However, an essential issue is whether the outcomes that education offers correspond with what the profession require. More specifically, placing art into a university system and an academic discourse can be seen as challenging fundamental ideas about artistic competence (Nerland & Jensen, 2014). In our study, language skills are not connected to theoretical knowledge and research or seen as a mean of gaining academic status. However, teachers and students express a need to learn 'what others already can, but we not are used to', i.e. to communicate verbally. Being part of the higher education system has not just compelled performing programmes to adapt to the standards of other academic programmes but also to create an ambition to further develop a language for professional practice.

Concluding remarks

The meanings of autonomy and independence are not fixed. Whilst being depicted as key concepts within higher education, various academic disciplines and professions will interpret these in different ways. This article has begun to explore constructions of autonomy and independence within music performance education in Sweden. To conclude, we argue that autonomy and independence largely involve an alignment to current societal and market conditions, which suggests a rather limited latitude in possible actions and positions.

We demonstrate that while the concepts encompass many different aspects, there is a clear focus on preparing students for a professional career. To this end, there is an emphasis on language skills and verbal communication as important components. It is striking that such competences are almost exclusively linked to entrepreneurship and individual artistry. While the concept of autonomy holds the potential to argue for a distinct professional field, inside and outside academia, the ability of students to reflect on social and ethical aspects of art or on musicians' role in society (cf. Swedish Code of Statutes, 2009:1037) is not recognised to any significant extent in the data. There are, however, outlines of ideas concerning the ability of musicians to participate in public discourse and debate through developed verbal skills. It seems to us that there is room for advancements in this area. At a time when nationalistic

forces seek to establish their cultural protectionist agenda so as to strengthen the national 'common' identity, it is our firm belief that higher education has to prepare music performance students for asserting their mandate in society – not only in terms of their individual artistic freedom, but also in terms of claiming the freedom of arts.

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