

You know your worth, sort of, right?

Playing the freelance music game

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Abstract

This article examines non-mainstream careers shaped by temporary employment in the gig economy, focusing on freelance musicians in the classical art music field. As freelancers, they navigate fluid and complex configurations of employment, merit, and professional relationships, relying on their capacity to sustain hope and perseverance. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, the study conceptualizes unequal relational conditions as embedded in taken-for-granted rules of the game and embodied in professionals' commitments to managing them, including forms of *illusio* and self-regulation. The empirical material consists of qualitative interviews. The analysis centers on everyday social practices within hiring procedures, where freelance musicians manage practical demands such as planning, preparation, and juggling multiple engagements and employers. They also relate to hiring procedures by reflecting on career status, industry dynamics, and strategies to enhance future prospects. Through these interrelated practices, freelancers both reproduce and negotiate the rules of the game.

Keywords

Freelance musicians, hiring procedures, everyday social practices, relational conditions, *illusio*, self-regulation, reproduction

Introduction

This article explores how professional freelance musicians in the classical art music genre manage and relate to everyday social practices and interactions, with a particular focus on hiring procedures such as receiving calls for gigs, remaining in the 'loop', and auditioning.

The empirical context attends to non-mainstream career trajectories characterized by temporary employment within the gig economy. Creative careers, in particular, constitute rich cases for understanding what it means to manage fluid and complex structures of

employment, merit, and relationships (Gill & Pratt 2008; Alacovska 2018, 2019). The article's focus on freelance musicians is part of a broader interest in careers that are fulfilling yet unstable, elitist yet precarious (e.g., Nørholm Lundin 2024a).

Freelance musicians operate within unequal structures as temporary employees working at gigs alongside permanently employed musicians (Scharff 2016). In their role as freelancers, they depend on their own capacity to sustain hope and perseverance (Alacovska 2018). As already indicated in the title quotation from interviewee Camilla – “You know your worth, sort of, right?” – she cannot take her career, or sense of worth, for granted. In this context, everyday routines and rituals – such as staying in shape and being prepared for calls and gigs – serve a function in enabling freelance musicians to manage the practical and emotional demands of the profession (Nørholm Lundin 2024b). Research on creative workers highlights the need for a deeper understanding of how professionals generate meaning and relate to their work in everyday contexts, while precarious conditions per se are comparatively well studied (Alacovska et al. 2022; Cinque et al. 2020).

Theoretically, this article explores the potential of Pierre Bourdieu's work (e.g. 1990, 1995, 1998, 2000a) to understand how the relational conditions of work and lifestyles are embedded in taken-for-granted and accepted rules of the game, and embodied in professionals' commitment to living up to these rules. In line with studies on creative workers, later Bourdieu-inspired research highlights the possibility of learning more about what occurs in everyday social practices and interactions, where individuals' actions and aspirations are mediated through habitus, emotions, and the body (Holt 2008; Edling 2012).¹

The purpose of this article is to explore how freelance musicians manage and relate to everyday social practices and interactions, with a particular focus on hiring procedures, such as receiving calls for gigs, remaining in the ‘loop’, and auditioning. The research questions are: What does it mean to play the freelance music game? How are freelance musicians managing and relating to the social practices and interactions involved in hiring procedures? How are unequal relational conditions of work and life reproduced and challenged in practice? The empirical study is based on interviews with professional freelance musicians in the classical art music genre, focusing on their careers and life trajectories.

The article aims to contribute new knowledge to studies on creative workers and Bourdieu-inspired research. What is lacking in studies of creative workers is an understanding of the deeper, embodied layers of work conditions, strategies, and experiences. Bourdieu-inspired research can be extended through theoretical and empirical explorations of how unequal relational conditions of work and life are embedded in and embodied through everyday social practices and interactions, and how they are reproduced and challenged in practice. Freelance musicians also offer a useful case for examining social inequality, given their marginal position both within the field and in mainstream society.

Previous studies

Creative workers are accustomed to managing complex and precarious working conditions (Comunian & England 2020; Nørholm Lundin 2022a, 2022b, 2024a). What they have mastered has now become a broader trend, reflected in the rise of flexible employment in the

gig economy, where enterprising and competitive individuals serve as role models (Morgan et al. 2013; De Peuter 2011).

Creative workers constitute rich cases for exploring what it means to navigate ambiguous working conditions that are simultaneously rewarding and unstable (Gill & Pratt 2008). Studies on creative workers have examined how it becomes possible to invest in uncertain career paths. Through the concept of ‘entrepreneurial selves’, scholars have problematized how professionals are driven to be highly active and take charge of both their careers and the management of the self (McNay 2009; Scharff 2016). Similarly, research shows that devotion or a sense of calling – particularly prevalent among creative workers – can function as a form of ‘false consciousness’ that enables uncertain pursuits (Gandini 2019) and risk-seeking behavior (Christiaens 2020). This devotion, often socialized from an early age and continuously reinforced through everyday routines and rituals (Nørholm Lundin 2024b), acts as a source of resilience, yet carries the potential downside of self-exploitation (Mackenzie & McKinlay 2021; McRobbie 2016; Kingsbury 2010; Butler & Stoyanova Russell 2018).

There is also a growing body of process- and actor-oriented research on how professionals manage these conditions. Such studies highlight the ‘relational labor’ in which creative workers not only invest in networks but also make sense of their work, doing something meaningful through fruitful collaborations (Alacovska et al. 2022). Similarly, research on ‘emotional labor’ shows that creative workers manage complexity while sustaining a sense of hope and resilience (Alacovska 2018; Mackenzie & McKinlay 2020). Further studies indicate that creative workers are driven by a sense of ‘calling’, which they sustain through narrative identity work (Cinque et al. 2020). This calling may involve a sense of being part of something larger than oneself, of going against the current, or of pursuing unconventional work.

In summary, studies of creative workers demonstrate how complex conditions are navigated by highly skilled and resilient professionals, albeit with the potential for (self-)exploitation. Research also points toward further exploration of the work that creative workers do to generate meaning and sustain hope and resilience, signaling a shift toward a more process- and actor-oriented perspective in which professionals manage and negotiate the rules of the game in everyday practices. Building on this, the present article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how such meaning-making processes are enacted in situ, and how they shape both individual experience and broader patterns of professional practice.

Theory

The theoretical framework is designed to examine how the relational conditions of work and lifestyle have both manifest and subtle implications, particularly for how professionals maintain and self-regulate social practices, beliefs, and emotions.

Relational conditions of work and life

Taking the social space and its relational living conditions and lifestyles as a point of departure (Bourdieu 1995), the work carried out by professionals to manage practical and

emotional demands differs across contexts (Everts et al. 2022; Brzozowska & Galuszka 2023).

For creative workers, the conditions involve managing ambiguous circumstances and ambivalent emotions, understood as two sides of the same coin (Scheer 2012; Heaney 2020). These are interconnected, as ambivalent emotions can be understood as “complex relational experiences within a wider web of interdependent social relationships” (Hillcoat-Nallétamby & Phillips 2011, p. 202). Moreover, ambiguous conditions, such as lack of access to crucial work spaces and places or dislocation and disruption in space, place, and time, can be understood as moments within broader socio-spatial relationships (Holt 2008; Nørholm Lundin 2022b).

The conditions of work and life tend to be reproduced through structurally embedded disadvantages, which professionals assume responsibility for managing (c.f. Bourdieu 1998). However, specific circumstances, such as a crisis or other ‘unsettled time’, can prompt negotiations of field-specific social practices or beliefs at the intersection of micro- and macro-level disruptions (Swidler 1986; Quinn et al. 2022; Flisbäck 2014; Threadgold 2018). Additionally, individual trajectories may initiate negotiations of social orders, as explored below in relation to how professionals maintain and self-regulate beliefs and social energy in connection with habitus and emotion.

Maintaining beliefs and social energy

Professionals are guided by their socialized practical sense of what is appropriate to do and be within a given field. This practical sense, or ‘feel’ for the game, also encompasses an embodied belief, or *illusio*, in the value of what one is doing within the field (Bourdieu 2000a, 1990). This belief appears to be particularly central in non-mainstream professions, characterized by a reversed economy and charismatic notions of calling, talent, destiny, and obligation (Bourdieu & Passeron 1974; Edling & Börjesson 2008; Kingsbury 2010; Nørholm Lundin 2024a).

The belief is not only about what one is doing but also about with whom one is doing it, as the *illusio* functions as a shared sense of purpose internalized as personal investment (Threadgold 2018; Scott & Woods 2017). Maintaining this belief is a central social practice in itself, as it generates a strong social energy (Gustavsson et al. 2012). It is “at once the condition for, and the product of, the game” (Bourdieu 2000b, p. 333) and is enacted through everyday actions, routines, and rituals (Nørholm Lundin 2024b, 2019; Wacquant 2006).

Habitus, emotions, and self-regulation

In this relational context, professionals shape and negotiate their actions and aspirations through processes of self-regulation, which are mediated by habitus and emotions. As emphasized by Holt (2008), this occurs in everyday social practices and interactions:

Individuals become embodied agents within the fabric of informal and formal social relations, which are often emotionally ambivalent – painful and gratifying at once. [...]

Habitus thus mediates how individuals navigate both recognition and misrecognition, as well as how they experience inclusion or exclusion (Holt 2008, p. 15).

The self-regulation of actions and aspirations is mediated by habitus, which entails a sense of one's place and of what is appropriate or possible for 'people like us' (Threadgold 2018; Edling 2012). In addition, quasi-bodily emotions such as shame, pride, ease, and unease act as 'social regulators' (Bourdieu 1976, 1990, 1998; Muel-Dreyfus 1985; Suanet & Arsten 2025; Franklin & Tranter 2022). The relationship between habitus, emotions, and the body can be understood as the locus of self-regulatory processes that shape one's being in the world, as suggested by Probyn (2005, p. 231): "in the body's privileged role as productive of practical sense, emotion seems to work to amplify or reduce instilled tendencies". Räsänen and Kauppinen (2019) further suggest that habitus connects to, and gains access to, social fields through moods and emotions.

The processes of self-regulation can be intensified in certain positions, such as that of the social climber, which may develop a cleft, composed, or chameleon habitus (Abrahams & Ingram 2013; Friedman 2016; Sapiro 2015). Freelance musicians can be understood as social climbers, pursuing careers that remain in motion without a clear endpoint such as permanent employment (Nørholm Lundin 2022a). The divided or composed nature of their habitus reflects an inherent ambivalence, or lack of harmony, between aspirations, social background, and position (cf. Muel-Dreyfus 1985). Freelancers also appear to embody a chameleon habitus, aligning with expectations of flexibility and adaptability in their role (Nørholm Lundin 2022a). This form of habitus may increase labour demands but also foster heightened consciousness and vigilance, requiring individuals to closely monitor and continually adjust their actions (Bourdieu 2000a; Aarseth et al. 2016).

In summary, the theoretical framework enables an understanding of how the relational and unequal conditions that freelancers inhabit set the parameters for the work they must perform, both in manifest and subtle ways. The belief, or *illusio*, that freelancers embody functions as a driving force in their work. This belief in the value of the game and its rules entails processes of self-regulation that contribute to the reproduction and negotiation of those very rules.

Methods and materials

The research process is inspired by a Bourdieu-influenced interest in understanding the social and symbolic significance of everyday social practices and interactions (Bourdieu 1977).

At the outset of the research process, a stakeholder organisation for professional musicians was contacted to obtain feedback on the project idea and to facilitate access to potential interviewees. The organisation informed its members about the study, and those interested in participating contacted the researcher directly.

Although the selection of participants was based on a convenience sample – namely, those who volunteered to take part – the sample meets the key selection criterion of being a professional freelance musician within the classical/art music genre in Sweden. At the same time, the sample reflects desirable diversity in terms of age, experience, perspectives,

and career orientations. As shown in Figure 1 below, participants display variation in career orientations, particularly in their combinations of gigs and temporary positions at the ‘institutions’ (permanent orchestras, ensembles, and choirs), work in the ‘free cultural sector’ (own projects, ensembles, and private employers), and other forms of employment or study. The sample is skewed in terms of gender, with a clear majority of women (11 out of 13). However, no distinct gender differences emerge in the material; rather, variations appear to be primarily individual.

The participants were interviewed on Zoom on two occasions, first in 2021 and subsequently in 2022. The interviews were open-ended and centred on the participants’ pathways into music, career choices, early career experiences, career development, processes of influence and change during and after the pandemic Covid-19, and future aspirations. The interviews resulted in approximately 450 pages of transcribed material. For reasons of confidentiality, the interviewees were given pseudonyms, their instruments were presented in grouped categories, and their ages were approximated. Apart from this, research ethics guidelines have been strictly adhered to.

Although the interviews initially focused on processes of influence and change during and after the pandemic Covid-19, they also contained extensive reflections on more general and recurring conditions – how things usually are – which proved useful for broader analytical discussions.² The broadly formulated interviews covering career entry, professional trajectories, and lived experience – combined with participants’ detailed narrative accounts, generated rich material that could be reinterpreted for new analytical purposes through a different theoretical lens (Bourdieu et al. 1991).

The analysis can be described as iterative and abductive (Coe et al. 2017), shaped as much by the empirical material as by the theoretical framework. The analysis consisted of repeated readings, selection of excerpts, coding, and thematic organisation of the material. The work with the material initially aimed to identify statements about everyday social practices and interactions. The material related to this proved so rich and extensive that a delimitation was necessary for this article. The material fell into two parts: social practices and interactions within hiring procedures, and at the gigs, respectively. A choice was made to focus on the hiring procedures and their broader implications – how freelancers manage and relate to these – while the material on what happens during gigs is reserved for a separate article, with a few exceptions where examples from gigs could be understood as related to hiring procedures.

The themes that were ultimately modelled pertained to both practical approaches and reflections on these. Themes presented in the findings are as follows: being called up; remaining in the ‘loop’; managing auditions and substitute lists; throwing oneself on the bicycle and getting the job done; you know your worth, sort of, right?

Context: working as a freelance musician in Sweden

Freelancers within the classical/art music genre are typically trained in higher music education programmes at conservatories, sometimes undertaking multiple programmes, including studies abroad. They generally obtain gigs or temporary positions either through recommendations from other musicians or by succeeding in competitive auditions.

Figure 1. Interviewees' pseudonyms, instrument group, approximate age, approximate years of work³, and career orientation.

Pseudonyms (gender)	Instru-ment group	Age	Years of work	Career orientations
Björn (M)	Strings	45+	20-25	Freelancer, mainly free cultural sector, sometimes institutions
Camilla (F)	Wind	50+	20-25	Freelancer, mainly institutions, sometimes free cultural sector
Malin (F)	Wind	35+	5-10	Freelancer, mainly institutions + teaching the instrument, other studies
Hanna (F)	Wind	40+	15-20	Freelancer, mainly institutions + other job
Isa (F)	Wind	30+	5-10	Freelancer, mainly institutions, sometimes free cultural sector + other studies
Agnes (F)	Wind	40+	15-20	Freelancer, mainly free cultural sector + other job
Felicia (F)	Strings	30+	5-10	Freelancer, mainly institutions
Ulrik (M)	Wind	45+	20-25	Freelancer, mainly institutions
Sara (F)	Strings	30+	5-10	Freelancer, mainly institutions + permanent position institution
Fredrika (F)	Singing	40+	10-15	Freelancer, mainly free cultural sector
Dora (F)	Strings	55+	30-35	Freelancer, mainly institutions + teaching the instrument
Louise (F)	Singing	35+	10-15	Freelancer, mainly institutions, sometimes free cultural sector + sometimes other jobs
Maja (F)	Strings	40+	5-10	Freelancer, mainly institutions

The labor market includes both short- and long-term gigs, as well as substitute positions in orchestras, ensembles, or choirs, with varying amounts of advance notice.⁴ Long-term substitute posts (ranging from a couple of months up to a year) are particularly desirable, although individual gigs with prestigious orchestras or ensembles are also highly valued (Nørholm Lundin, 2024a).

Most freelancers pursue a combination of different types of engagements: within the 'institutions' (permanent orchestras, ensembles, choirs) and in the 'free cultural sector' (own projects, ensembles, and private employers), and other forms of employment or study (see Figure 1, above). Freelancing can be part of an early career establishment phase, but it can also continue throughout an entire working life. It may be self-chosen, but is usually not planned; rather, it arises from the fact that permanent positions are highly attractive yet scarce, and competition for them is intense, often drawing applicants from around the world.

Findings

The analysis takes as its point of departure everyday social practices and interactions in order to understand their social and symbolic significance – how they reflect, reproduce, and negotiate social order (Bourdieu 1977).

More specifically, it explores how freelance musicians manage and relate to hiring procedures. This includes *managing* everyday practices such as being called up, remaining in the ‘loop’, auditions and ranked substitute lists, and throwing oneself on the bicycle to get the job done. In addition, it explores how they *relate* to these practices by reflecting on their career status, the dynamics of the industry, ways to improve their prospects, and how they navigate everyday practices. Through these social practices and interactions, freelancers both reproduce and negotiate the rules of the game.

Being ‘called up’

In this section, the social practice of being called about gigs and engagements is examined. It is understood as part of the relational conditions of work, with implications for how freelancers work and live, as well as how they experience their situations and perceive their options (c.f. Bourdieu, 1995).

For example, freelancer Malin describes receiving numerous calls regarding gigs and engagements as confirmation that her career is functioning well, with commitments secured at least six months in advance serving as a positive indicator. Moreover, the necessity of choosing between offers, rather than being able to accept them all, signals that she has attained a certain degree of privilege. Malin discusses this situation with pride, joy, and relief:

[I] was quite *called* by the orchestras, around the country, so that suddenly I couldn’t say yes to everything but had to sort of choose. (Malin)

This hiring procedure – via calls about gigs – reflects the relational conditions of work and lifestyle, shaping life in both manifest and subtle ways. To begin with, being called can be understood as a social practice. This practice is governed by ‘golden rules’, which emphasize always being in shape and ready for calls and gigs, and always saying yes rather than no. This has manifest, practical implications, as it requires freelancers to prepare for, plan around, adapt to, and process unpredictability. It entails juggling gigs, employers, and networks, and navigating periods of overwork alongside periods without engagements.

The relational conditions are reflected in the character – and perhaps also the volume – of work that freelancers perform, which differs from that of permanently employed musicians and employers, who do not have to manage the same kind of unpredictability and for whom work can constitute a secure, taken-for-granted base. What further complicates the situation is that freelancers work alongside permanent employees. They share the work but not the conditions. Moreover, permanent employees and employers hold the upper hand, exercising power over hiring, recommendations, agendas, and social interactions.

This creates fertile ground for the reproduction of unequal social order, since freelancers are compelled not only to follow the golden rules of the game to obtain gigs, but also to

embody a professional pride or ethos in managing these conditions. Charismatic ideals appear to contribute to their ability to persevere – living one’s dream, doing something extraordinary – alongside a strong sense of personal responsibility: if one cannot handle it, perhaps one should not be a freelancer (c.f. Bourdieu & Passeron 1977).

Processes of self-regulation emerge as a way of sustaining belief in an industry marked by challenges (c.f. Bourdieu 1998). This may involve making ‘a virtue out of necessity’, as when Malin describes her situation in the quotation above. Tokens of success and privilege are thus processed as confirmation and as sources of hope. Felicia confirms the significance of being engaged for a longer period, stating: “a small stamp of approval [which means] sort of feeling that now I’m a bit of a real musician” (Felicia). The caution embedded in these statements – “a small stamp” and “sort of a feeling” – can be understood as a consequence of the relational conditions, as merits and privileges in this field are perishable for artists, particularly for freelancers.

At the same time, there is a risk that such narratives represent retrospective rationalizations in which necessity is turned into virtue. A dominated position may generate processes of self-regulation in which one adjusts and accepts. Permanent positions are subject to increasingly intense competition, often involving applicants from an international context. It also appears to become more difficult with age, due to ageism. This implies that one may remain a freelancer for an entire career, which some interviewees experience as manageable, while others find it difficult or even overly challenging. In this context, making a freelance career ‘work’ through calls and short-term engagements is established as the most viable alternative for most freelancers.

Making the best of the situation – trying to be called and feeling satisfied with it – can be understood as a way of playing the game. This may function in the short term, but it can also keep freelancers in a dominated position as a flexible buffer in the music industry. At the same time, some attempt to challenge the rules of the game by becoming more independent, investing in their own creative projects, or combining them with other jobs to enhance autonomy. Björn describes the vulnerability involved in waiting for calls, a situation he wishes to move away from:

Many people live a whole life, waiting for a call from [orchestra in city X, orchestra in city Y], etc., but if they haven’t received those calls for a year, it starts to get pretty tough. (Björn).

To summarize, this section demonstrates how the social practice of being called has both manifest and subtle implications for freelancers’ work, shaping how they work and how they feel about their work. The golden rules of the game – to always be in shape and ready for calls and gigs – both motivate freelancers and simultaneously maintain them in a dominated position.

Remaining in the 'loop'

Freelancers manage the relational conditions that entail dependence on receiving calls about gigs and engagements. In this section, the social practice of managing and relating to the associated 'loop' is examined.

As illustrated in the preceding theme, Malin's quotation suggests that securing work and sustaining a career, even six months at a time, can be experienced as sources of joy, pride, and relief. This may be understood as what is desirable about the loop: to be *in* it. At the same time, freelancers are motivated by various risks and difficulties associated with falling out of the loop. According to Maja, it is then difficult to re-enter the loop: "either you're in or you're out, and if you're out then you're really out" (Maja). The difficulties of gaining entry relate to the fact that the natural points of contact diminish outside the gigs. In the worst case, this may also involve an implicit blacklist.

The loop can be understood as an immaterial phenomenon that freelancers both manage and relate to. As such, the loop is surrounded by charismatic notions, on the one hand as something desirable and, on the other, as entailing risks and difficulties that must be avoided and managed (c.f. Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). This becomes particularly significant in light of prior investments of time and energy required to establish oneself within the loop. Maja further describes it as a form of sacrifice that one must make in order to secure a favorable position in the loop: "you have to do a lot of kamikaze gigs to get a good position" (Maja). The loop appears to be associated with a strong sense of purpose, while its management and relational engagement generate social energy that sustains participation in the game, reinforcing adherence to its rules, continued play, and hope (c.f. Threadgold 2018; Scott & Woods 2017; Gustavsson et al. 2012; Alacovska 2018).

In addition, there are notions of the loop as unpredictable; difficult to understand and influence. Freelancers appear to devote substantial energy to attempting to decode the loop—how it functions and what occurs within it. Malin exemplifies how she can observe how those who are highly active and frequently performing may change over time, and the reasons for such shifts are not always evident:

If you happen to fall out of that loop – if they start calling someone else instead – then you disappear from the loop very quickly [...] they've found other favorites [...] and then the contact just vanishes. (Malin)

Malin speaks specifically about the risk of falling out, because "they have found new favorites" (Malin). This reflects the relational conditions that freelancers must navigate, namely dependence on being selected. Malin also mentions the importance of remaining in good standing and being reliant on someone's favorable regard. This also entails costs, in that Malin sometimes feels frustrated by how accommodating and flexible she can be, even when she experiences this as exceeding her own boundaries.

The loop symbolizes the advantage that the industry holds over freelancers, both the manifest difficulties of remaining within it and the subtle difficulties of understanding it and feeling comfortable in it. As in the social practice of being called, it concerns asymmetrical power relations between an active and a passive party, insofar as it is employers

and permanently employed musicians who make the calls, with the power to recommend, assess, hire, and respond. Malin describes the difficulty of influencing one's chances, which was intensified during the pandemic Covid-19 but also reflects the ordinary conditions, where it is a matter of being relevant, current, in the loop:

I've always thought my best strategy is to meet people in person. But that hasn't been possible [during the pandemic], so staying in the loop and maintaining the network – maintaining the network at a distance – that's hard. At one point I contacted the institutions. Just like that, when last spring was so utterly miserable, to say that I still exist. But I don't know if that has any direct effect. There's a greater chance of running into someone by chance on the bike path /ha/. There's a better chance of being called that way than if I send an email. (Malin)

The fact that freelancers devote substantial energy to remaining within the loop, while also reflecting upon it, may be understood as an expression of the relational conditions under which they operate. The heightened vigilance they express in relation to the loop can be interpreted as an instance of a split, composed, or chameleon habitus (Bourdieu 2000a). This, in turn, may be understood as an expression of freelancers' temporary positions: in constant motion, yet without a clearly defined endpoint. It may be understood as continuous social mobility, negotiated by freelancers through both practical and emotional engagement.

To summarize, this section shows how the social practices of staying in shape and prepared for calls and gigs can be linked to charismatic notions of the loop. Remaining within and managing the unpredictable loop can be understood as an expression of relational conditions, reflected in increased vigilance and ongoing efforts to navigate it.

Managing auditions and substitute lists

Freelancers navigate relational conditions that entail a dependence on remaining within the loop. In this section, the social practices of managing and relating to auditions for permanent posts and ranked substitute lists, are explored.

Freelancers describe auditions as a challenge they appreciate and are able to manage. At the same time, this often entails being pushed to their limits, which in the long run may be experienced as overly exhausting. Preparations for auditions are extensive and may involve the long-term refinement of technique and artistry. They may also involve mental training: concentrating on one's own performance, refraining from comparison, and so forth. Isa further emphasizes the importance of practicing the act of auditioning itself:

I've auditioned a lot and do so as much as I can, and I think it's very developmental. I know many people find it very uncomfortable, but I think you should do it, even if you really don't want to. Partly because you should be visible, meet lots of people, travel to auditions and so on [...]. It's a natural part of it, since it's a social job; you have to fit into a group. [...] If you're going to get good at something, you have to practice it. It would be really stupid not to try to get good at auditioning, and never go. Many people

have the attitude that they'll only go when they can win; I think that puts too much pressure on a single occasion. (Isa)

For Isa, preparations are part of a strategic approach aimed at strengthening her chances of securing a permanent position. This simultaneously reflects her broader perspective on what a freelancer needs to live up to: being visible, social, and so on. In this way, her everyday social practice also embodies a 'feel' for the rules of the game (c.f. Bourdieu 1990).

Auditions are associated with intense performance anxiety, as attractive positions are at stake. The pressure lies in performing complex musical works at a high level, in real time. Competition is also experienced as increasing, with more international applicants. Furthermore, the process is perceived as becoming more difficult with age, due to ageism. Agnes suggests that an audition can be compared to a European championship in one's instrument; it is that difficult to win a permanent position. Yet not only the permanent position is at stake, but also the applicant's sense of how things are going.

Auditions accentuate relational conditions: being dependent on the judgment of others. In connection with this, self-regulating processes emerge, as freelancers embody a sense of what they must – not only have to, but also want to – be able to handle (c.f. Bourdieu, 1995, 1998). This is exemplified in the quotation from Isa above, in the preparations she undertakes: keeping in shape, rehearsing audition repertoire, and engaging in mental training. That she also maintains that one should practice doing auditions can be compared to how freelancers manage and relate to the 'loop'.

In connection with auditions, freelancers' sense of how they are doing and of their opportunities appears to be pushed to its limits. They express intense nervous pressure, which contributes to feelings of confusion:

I thought it seemed [as if I wasn't good enough], because I won the audition but didn't get the job, and then it was hard to know what was rumor and what was true, because it seemed [true] (Agnes).

There are further expressions of this, in which the external gaze, in the form of others' judgments, becomes embodied. Felicia describes a similar feeling, in which she experiences herself as a fraud who is pretending, deceiving:

It's really tough, I always feel like a fraud [...] that syndrome called, when you're pretending – I always think I'm fooling people at auditions, I always feel that they'll see it, because I actually don't know anything. [...] It's not at all the same when I freelance, because when I come back to the orchestra as a freelancer it doesn't feel like that. But it's this being judged in some way – it's incredibly inhibiting. (Felicia)

Felicia's feeling can be understood as an expression of a self-regulating process, in which feelings of shame and guilt come to the fore (c.f. Bourdieu 1998). This may be interpreted as an expression of embodied symbolic violence inherent in the situation. Isa exemplifies

how unnatural the situation is, in that it is not actually possible to be oneself, yet it is important to appear confident and calm: “just endure and try not to look nervous”.

Particularly pressing are the extended processes of evaluation that arise if applicants proceed to trial weeks in the orchestra. Paradoxically, this expression of success appears to be experienced as even more pressurizing. Since there are usually multiple candidates undergoing audition weeks across different productions, the process is prolonged, creating a state of limbo – uncertainty about whether one will get the job, whether one will have to move, and so on. Agnes describes this:

Trial weeks are absolutely dreadful, emotionally absolutely dreadful /laughs/. [...] I thought it was a bit too pressured, a pressured situation, because it goes on for so long, it's such a drawn-out process; you're not preparing for one week but at least three weeks, and they're spread out over maybe half a year [...]. Which made it difficult to plan, because you were waiting – if you were to get that job you couldn't move to that place. It was like you were constantly waiting for decisions, half a year at a time. (Agnes)

Another aspect of auditions is that ranked substitute lists also appear to be established in connection with them. That is, even if one does not secure the permanent position, it may lead to temporary engagements. However, in the same way as with the ‘loop’, these ranked lists appear to be complex and unpredictable. According to Maja, these lists are subject to politics and power play, as is much else in freelancers' everyday lives:

It changes [...] then they don't use those audition lists. [...] So I know several people who came first, but they have never worked in the orchestra; they keep calling in others. There are parallel lists somehow. [...] There's a lot of politics and a bit of power play and things like that. I don't know. I try not to think too much about it. (Maja)

To summarize, this section demonstrates how auditions constitute high-stakes occasions. Auditions have a sorting function, not only in manifest ways – who obtains the position – but also in more subtle ways, namely who is able to handle the pressure. Auditions reflect an asymmetrical power dynamic, in which freelancers are not only dependent on the judgments and goodwill of others, but also tend to embody this external gaze.

Throwing oneself onto the bicycle to get the job done

As demonstrated in previous sections, it is crucial for freelancers to remain within the ‘loop’, both in order to secure work and in relation to how they perceive their careers, abilities, and opportunities. This section explores social practices and interactions in relation to managing suddenly arising gigs, for example throwing oneself onto the bicycle and getting the job done. The freelancer's capacity to resolve these sudden engagements, and the manner in which the freelancer is received, may serve a sorting function.

Ulrik recounts what happens when one receives a gig at short notice. One may be sitting at home in the morning warming up on the instrument, receive a call, and then “throw oneself onto the bicycle, arrive just in time for rehearsal”, he explains. Being able, in such

a situation, to feel that one performs the job well entails a positive experience, with the others being eager for him to come:

They might call me when they're in a panic and need someone who can jump in, someone who can do the job well. [...] I've substituted a bit in the X-Orchestra, a dream – then you know if they call half an hour before, 'I don't know if I'll make it', 'but take a taxi'. You arrive just in time and hear the opening of *William Tell*, you unpack the instrument, haven't played a single note [in the morning], sneak in, the first thing might be a solo, maybe you've played it a few times before. You know it might be the only time you get to play with them. But I know I can pick up the instrument and play – that you can *manage*. It might not feel perfect, but I produce a tone. (Ulrik)

Ulrik's narrative demonstrates how situations involving sudden gigs can, on the one hand, function as a constructive exchange between the orchestra and the freelancer. On the other hand, it shows how he is able to reflect upon these situations in a manner that affirms his professional pride and hope. That is to say, it can be understood as part of the work to process such situations – to use or transform them into confirmation. This exemplifies how maintaining *illusio* may be understood as something that both requires maintenance and generates social energy (c.f. Bourdieu 2000b).

Ulrik's account also contains charismatic myths that appear to contribute to a sense that the effort is worthwhile (c.f. Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). This is exemplified in Ulrik's story of being suddenly called in – throwing himself onto his bicycle, into a taxi, or onto a train, arriving just in time, and making an entrance to the grand strains of *William Tell* – a narrative that conveys a sense of adventure, excitement, and strength.

The charismatic dimension, which thus serves a motivating function, also involves the possibility that it may be the dream orchestra calling; and in that case, one may have only a single opportunity, Ulrik explains. In his account, it concerns not only the concrete opportunity but, above all, the experience of playing with the dream orchestra. That is to say, having that experience carries a deeper meaning, connected to the fact that the work is associated with a calling, a lifestyle, and a personal passion. This implies that the work generates considerable joy, while simultaneously entailing downsides in the form of self-exploitation.

The freelancer's capacity to resolve these sudden gigs, and the manner in which the freelancer is received, may thus serve a sorting function. It may lead to a positive confirmation of hope, professional pride, and dignity, or conversely contribute to doubt and ambivalence. In Ulrik's case, the experience appears to culminate in a positive affirmation of his sense of being able to perform the job well: "they might call me when they're in a panic and need someone who can jump in, someone who can do the job well" (Ulrik). This reflects the relational conditions under which freelancers sometimes experience a constructive exchange with employers, and at other times experience themselves as interchangeable. For Ulrik, the overall balance of these experiences seems to result in a sense that the career is functioning; at the very least, there remains a sense of meaning.

As with most examples of the social practices and interactions that freelancers must manage, the outcomes appear potentially divergent. They may either nourish hope within a pressured, elitist working life, or foster doubt when freelancers are subjected to excessive strain. Maja exemplifies a contrasting experience of a gig for which she had prepared, managed reasonably well, yet received no response. In such circumstances, she must struggle more intensely to preserve a sense of hope and professional pride. This may be understood as an example of how the situation's inherent disadvantage – being taken for granted, receiving no feedback, or being treated in a manner perceived as unreasonable – shapes the experience:

Then I was called in [...] ‘can you come in and play *Carmen* in two hours?’ I just said, ‘okay, sure’. I hadn’t played it in a year. Then I went in and did it, and I also played a lot of things I hadn’t played before [...] and it went well. But you receive no feedback at all, and I started thinking that maybe they didn’t know I had been called in only two hours earlier, so I felt I had to mention that I had in fact been called in two hours before, and people just said, ‘okay’. And I played a passage that is very, very difficult [...] and I knew it extremely well, and they seemed puzzled and said, ‘Well, are you playing at all? We can’t hear you’. ‘Yes, I’m playing, but I’m playing with the group’, so it was completely integrated into the ensemble. There are constantly comments like that. (Maja)

In comparison with Ulrik’s narrative above, Maja’s account of being suddenly called in is less hopeful. Rather, it appears to reflect a stark reality, consisting of attempts to maintain a sense of performing the job well while also deserving to be treated well. Such experiences may contribute to feelings of doubt and ambivalence regarding what to believe in and invest in, as Maja exemplifies: “my problem is that I don’t want anything anymore” (Maja). A recurring theme in the analysis concerns the substantial differences that may arise depending on whether one succeeds in sustaining a sense of coherence in one’s career, or whether the demands become too severe. This reflects the relational conditions within which merits and privileges are perishable.

To summarize, this section shows that not only being called and hired matters for freelancers’ sense of how things are progressing. Freelancers sustain and negotiate a sense of hope, professional pride, and dignity, at times under demanding conditions.

You know your worth, sort of, right?

As demonstrated in previous sections, it is crucial for freelancers to remain within the ‘loop’ while also managing auditions, ranked substitute lists, and suddenly arising gigs. This has implications for how freelancers can work, as well as for how they feel about their careers. In this section, I examine how freelancers manage and relate to their careers and to their own sense of worth.

When freelancer Camilla reflects on her work and how things are progressing, she does so with a sense of hope and professional pride. Yet her statement, “You know your worth, sort of, right?”, is multi-layered. It can be interpreted as an expression of integrity and of

knowing her own value, while simultaneously acknowledging that, as a freelancer, she can never be entirely certain – “sort of, right?”. This reflects the relational conditions of freelance work, in which merits and privileges are perishable (c.f. Bourdieu 1995; Nørholm Lundin, 2024a).

Simultaneously, these relational conditions seem to be embodied, manifesting as heightened vigilance – “sort of, right?” – reminiscent of a split, composed, or chameleon habitus (c.f. Bourdieu 1995, 2000a). This type of habitus appears to be present among freelancers as an embodied expectation of their role and position, as well as of the responsibility they assume for managing it. However, there is variation in how habitus is expressed among freelancers, linked to their social background (cf. Bourdieu & Passeron 1977), which is reflected in their experiences, strategies, and work.⁵

Particularly the freelancers Sara and Fredrika, who come from musician families or similar cultural or freelance professions, seem to embody a certain sense of familiarity with this position. A majority of the freelancers come from an educated middle-class background with cultural interests, sometimes also in the context of church music. This manifests in an ambition to strive forward, but also in an ambivalence or unease regarding the precarious working conditions of cultural workers. A few freelancers, Agnes and Maja, come from a farming background and display approaches similar to those of the middle-class children, with the exception of Maja, who expresses a certain surprise about where her interest in music originated, as well as a sense of loneliness in relation to what she experienced as inadequate music professors.

It can be observed that the freelancers appear to embody a split, composed, or chameleon habitus, shaped through music education and professional life, which corresponds to their role and position. This can lead to feelings of ambivalence, dividedness, or unease in the relationship between their role and position, and their professional identity and upbringing. At the same time, adopting a composed or chameleon-like habitus may be naturalized, as it is expected of them.

Their original habitus may either align with their professional habitus, role, and position, or, conversely, generate feelings of ambivalence and unease (cf. Muel-Dreyfus 1985). For example, this may involve, as in Sara’s case, a musical family background and an established career that generates ease and continuity, or, as in Felicia’s case, a more traditional occupational background and an ambivalent relation to a precarious freelance trajectory. This gives rise to processes of self-regulation, in which questions of hope, dreams, dignity, and autonomy are negotiated (c.f. Bourdieu 1998). The majority of the freelancers seem to embody an ambivalence, as they simultaneously express that they are precisely where they want to be in life, yet that the costs are at the limit or too high. Strategies for challenging or stretching the rules of the game may include creating space for their own creative projects, combining freelance work with other jobs, daring to present themselves as who they are, and daring to say no.

The possibility of maintaining a sense of hope and professional pride through personal reflection is significant for the freelancer’s ability to continue. As indicated in Camilla’s quotation above, this may be understood as a form of self-preservation: sustaining one’s own sense of value. For Camilla, this is related to having been able to build a functioning

freelance career, with certain privileges – for example, being a recurring and appreciated contributor in certain contexts, and being able to work locally. Furthermore, it involves a sense of being able to manage the challenges of freelance life, such as planning and coordinating her calendar. Interestingly, she speaks of this as a way of relating to her profession – as a position one adopts, in which one takes one’s profession seriously and consciously relates to risk:

So, it’s kind of a choice you just have to decide to make. Week 11, I’m going skiing, you know. Okay, if you don’t – if you don’t really feel like, ‘I can’t, if I get a call that week from the Philharmonic, I’ll regret it my whole life’. Well, then you shouldn’t schedule a ski trip. [...] You just – you simply have to decide. *Relate* to your profession, you know. (Camilla)

Interestingly, Camilla also speaks of this as a disposition – something a freelancer either possesses or acquires: “one might have that disposition, or one might acquire that disposition” (Camilla). This can be understood as an expression of an embodied feel for the game – not only knowing what one ought to do, but also what one can do, as something one is.

Sara also reflects on how things are going in relation to her ability to manage – through her skills, but also through a kind of disposition. For her, pressure may arise during certain periods, in connection with auditions or phases of heavy workload. Yet the overarching feeling is one of calm, which may be understood as a form of ease. She describes this as an ability to be present in the moment, with a certain composure. An overarching sense of doubt or questioning of her own ability is absent, and thus functions as a counter-image:

I think I’m fairly spared from that, that kind of worry. I can get stressed and nervous in the moment, but not really that overarching feeling of, oh, should I really be doing this, am I good enough for this, can I do this. I don’t think that has to do with having exaggerated self-esteem or being overly self-confident, but more that I’m simply [present] where I am. And I’ve had quite a bit of luck; things have come up that I’ve been able to say yes to. It’s happened fairly naturally; it hasn’t been that I’ve searched and fought like crazy to move forward. I’ve received things that I’ve been able to accept. (Sara)

As mentioned earlier, processes of self-regulation also occur in relation to one’s own sense of responsibility – what one feels one must be able to manage. Sara exemplifies the demands of her career, in which hiring procedures play a significant role: she aims to schedule as many gigs as possible while still maintaining high standards of preparation.

Sometimes if you work a bit too much, the preparation suffers, because you can’t do everything; sometimes it ends up on the edge. It becomes extra intense, and there’s a greater risk of that when you freelance, because you piece together your own schedule, and the basic instinct is to say yes to everything that is physically possible to squeeze in. Sometimes that leads to a feeling – usually when you’re in the middle of it – it’s hard to plan for, because you don’t know; you say yes because you have nothing else at that

moment, and then more things come. [...] Sometimes the sum of the parts becomes a bit too much. (Sara)

The pressure appears to generate processes of self-regulation concerning both Sara's affective experience and what she considers herself obliged to be capable of managing.

Then it's not so enjoyable. I think that's like any job. I haven't felt it that often, but sometimes shorter periods, a week or two, when you think this doesn't feel good – partly that I'm not doing a good enough job because I don't have the possibility to prepare, I'm tired, I'm in a bad mood. I know this is actually fun, but it doesn't feel fun right now. There have absolutely been such periods; it's not a dream all the time to play, but you learn to handle that. (Sara)

What consistently emerges in the interviews is that these reflections ultimately centre on a sense of personal responsibility for managing the demands involved: "it's not a dream all the time to play, but you learn to handle that" (Sara).

Although this article does not explicitly focus on social background, the findings suggest that freelancers' upbringings shape how they manage and relate to their careers, including their sense of self-worth. This may, in turn, contribute to the reproduction of social inequality. Growing up in environments where music, cultural, and freelance occupations are familiar, combined with successful career trajectories – as in the cases of Sara and Felicia – fosters a sense of ease and belonging. Although they emphasize the hard work involved, their narratives are characterized by optimism and confidence in the future. Their strategies focus on sustaining, expanding, and creatively developing careers that are already functioning well.

By contrast, a more traditional upbringing, combined with careers that are precarious, still in an establishment phase, or marked by difficulties securing sufficient gigs – as in the cases of Felicia, Louise, Agnes, and Maja – reproduces a social order in which managing unease and ambivalence requires considerable effort. Although they express a strong commitment to and love for their work, their narratives reveal a persistent tension regarding the conditions of freelance employment. Their strategies reflect both a determination to persevere and an effort to create greater balance and stability in their lives.

In summary, this theme shows that when freelancers reflect on their value – their abilities, their disposition – this can be understood as an expression of self-regulating processes. Here, freelancers both maintain and negotiate their position in the game, which is mediated by their habitus.

Conclusions and discussion

Returning to the quotation from the interviewee Camilla – "You know your worth, sort of, right?" – knowing one's value appears crucial for freelancers. To begin with, this form of confidence, in relation to one's own career and abilities, is required to perform convincingly during engagements and performances. In addition, occupational pride, hope, and dignity are essential in order to be able to sustain a career.

A recurring theme in the interviews is that freelancers engage extensively in reflection on their careers – how they are progressing, their abilities, and their opportunities. These reflections, in turn, revolve around being able to play the freelance music game, not least managing hiring procedures and their broader implications for work and lifestyle. Because they are freelancers, this becomes a central part of their work. How these hiring procedures are handled have consequences not only for concrete opportunities but also for how the situation is experienced subjectively.

On the one hand, this concerns, in a more concrete sense, the ability to *manage* hiring procedures, not least the ‘golden rules’ of the game: always being ready and in shape for performances. It also involves managing nervous pressure and power dynamics in connection with auditions and suddenly arising gigs, as well as juggling multiple engagements, employers, and complex scheduling arrangements. On the other hand, it concerns, in a more subtle sense, the ability to *relate* to these rules of the game: to maintain a sense that one’s career is functioning and that one is made of the right material for it. It entails decoding the industry and finding ways to influence one’s chances, as well as processing one’s experiences.

At the same time, this sense of value – how one’s career is progressing, one’s abilities and opportunities – appears to be under constant negotiation in everyday social practices and interactions, not least within hiring procedures, where freelancers are pushed to their limits, sometimes beyond them. This is related to the relational conditions characterizing artists and freelancers in particular, as merits and privileges are highly temporary. Hiring procedures bring this to a head, as much is at stake. In this situation, they are dependent on being selected, hired, contacted, and recommended by others.

These rules of the game are embodied by freelancers in the form of increased vigilance, expressed through a split, composed, or chameleon-like habitus that corresponds to their role and position. In connection with everyday social practices and interactions, processes of self-regulation take place – of beliefs, hopes, occupational pride, and sense of dignity. There are also ongoing negotiations regarding whether the work is worth the effort.

The rules of the game are both embedded in taken-for-granted structures and embodied in freelancers’ willingness to live up to them. Freelancers’ embodied mastery of these rules – feeling capable, willing, and obliged to comply – enables participation while simultaneously reinforcing a dominated position. Because the rules exert a firm grip, they are largely reproduced in practice. Yet there are indications that freelancers attempt to stretch or challenge them by creating space for personal creativity, interpretative autonomy, close collaborations, or by asserting individuality – for instance, by declining certain engagements or securing alternative forms of employment. This suggests that *illusio* may be renegotiated, mainly at the individual level.

Overall, freelancers emerge as practitioners of resilience, adept at managing complexity out of both necessity and aspiration. As flexible forms of employment become increasingly prevalent, their experiences offer important insights. At the same time, their working conditions require improvement, as expectations often appear boundless. It is crucial to look beyond the composed exterior, which may conceal the embodied demands, aspirations, and sacrifices underpinning continued participation.

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Notes

- ¹ For freelance musicians, this may involve managing an ongoing freelance career that is not entirely voluntary, depending on how their careers have developed after an initial period of establishment.
- ² See previous publications: Nørholm Lundin 2022a–b, 2024a.
- ³ Since the transition between education and work is often fluid, as many combine studies with paid work or take breaks from studies due to temporary positions, the period of years of work is indicated in approximate terms.
- ⁴ Sources: The professional Orchestral Music in Sweden (governmental report, SOU 2006, 34); Ett år med pandemin [One year with the pandemic] (report from Swedish Agency for Cultural Policy Analysis, 2021); description of occupations at union Saco's homepage (2021); personal contact with union Symf (2021).
- ⁵ The aim of the study is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of freelancers' social backgrounds, although it is relevant here to highlight certain tendencies. In brief, the backgrounds can be summarized as follows, based on parents' occupations and lifestyles: musicians or other cultural/freelance professions (Sara, Fredrika); middle-class backgrounds with higher education and cultural interests, sometimes including church affiliation (Louise, Felicia, Malin, Björn, Ulrik, Dora, Camilla, Hanna); and agricultural or rural upbringings (Agnes, Maja).

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