

Piano Lessons in the Office: Playing to Be/Come Alive

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A grand piano is positioned towards the end of a tall-ceilinged room. Fourteen people, variously sitting, standing, or leaning, are talking quietly together. Judging from the collective posture, this might be a Schubertian soiree a moment before the great man plays, but instead a woman in a smart, contemporary suit steps forward towards the instrument. She sits, fumbles to adjust the height of the stool, smooths her skirt, breathes deeply and, as the chatting subsides, starts to perform the middle movement of a Mozart piano sonata with a nice attention to detail and a few tiny slips. The audience, also in formal attire, applauds warmly, and the process is repeated, as each person steps shyly forward to play a short piece, mostly a familiar Western classical favourite but sometimes more contemporary, popular repertoire, delivered with some competency, from beginner to fairly advanced, until everyone there has made their contribution. Informal drinks follow, accompanied by animated chatter.

This event took place about 12 years ago. The pianists were members of a piano club I helped start in a law firm in London perhaps 16 years ago. The music teaching room where the performance described above took place was windowless and had previously been a chair store. Once the leaking ceiling had been repaired, the human resources department allocated funds from the employee wellbeing budget to hire and maintain a second-hand baby grand piano. The piano club engaged some talented postgraduates from a nearby London conservatoire as teachers. Next, an advert for lessons went out to the 2000-plus members of staff across all job types, from junior administrators to senior lawyers, inviting them to sign up for formal piano lessons and to play together for fun. The club developed a small, but steady membership of around 20 to 30 people

and I believe still continues today.¹ Though it focused on providing lessons, the club also provided opportunities for members to perform in front of one another, both within the firm's music room and also in nearby venues, including the showroom of an internationally-known piano house in central London and the living room of one of the piano club's members. Additionally, the club arranged for world-class and emerging-talent performers, such as the violinist Nicola Benedetti and pianist Benjamin Grosvenor, to play occasional lunchtime concerts put on for everyone working in the building. Lawyers were encouraged to bring their clients along, too, as a nod to 'client development'.

I subsequently left the law firm, where I'd worked as a lawyer for several decades, and returned to my first career as a musicologist and classically-trained pianist, with a growing interest in psychology. It was during this time I became curious to find out just what the piano club had meant to my ex-colleagues, and this led to my current project. My research question was 'what is the experience of adults who learn the piano whilst working in a demanding professional environment unrelated to music?' There is considerable evidence that music making, including adults learning the piano or other instruments alone or with others, supports cognitive development, social skills, and mental wellbeing in diverse populations.² There are also books for the non-specialist audience identifying the importance of pianos in the lives of public figures working professionally outside music, such as those by Alan Rusbridger and François Noudelmann.³ In contrast, this study looks in depth not at well-known individuals but rather at the collective experience of ordinary working people who somehow manage

¹ Just a few years ago, so a long time after I left the firm, I received the following message via LinkedIn from a lawyer who was working there: 'I've just heard that you're the person responsible for the music room at [name of law firm] and I wanted to say thank you on behalf of all the secretly musical lawyers who enjoy that room every day!'

² See Susan Hallam, 'The Power of Music: Its Impact on the Intellectual, Social and Personal Development of Children and Young People', *International Journal of Music Education*, 28/3 (2010), 269–289; Susan Hallam and Evangelos Himonides, *The Power of Music: An Exploration of the Evidence*, Cambridge UK: Open Book Publishers, 2022, doi: 10.11647/OBP.0292; Peter J. Jutras, 'The Benefits of Adult Piano Study as Self-Reported Selected Adult Piano Students', *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 54/2 (2006), 97–110; Raymond A. R. MacDonald, 'Music, Health, and Well-Being: A review' [E-Journal], *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being*, 8/1 (2013), 20635.

³ Alan Rusbridger, *Play it again: An amateur against the impossible* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2013); François Noudelmann, *The Philosopher's Touch: Sartre, Nietzsche, and Barthes at the Piano*, trans. B. J. Reilly (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). (Original work published in French 2008.)

to tuck their piano playing into a demanding and otherwise non-musical professional environment.

At the time of undertaking this investigation, I was aware of how musicological and music-education research into Western art music and its instruments is just one part of a more plural and inclusive curriculum in even the most conservative university music departments in the UK.⁴ In UK state schools, too, the teaching of music as an academic discipline or practical subject, especially the teaching of Western art music on Western instruments, has been in sharp decline for ideological reasons as well as lack of funding.⁵ I appreciate, therefore, that a study of the experience of contemporary amateur performers of largely Western classical music played on the piano, the most archly romantic of instruments, may seem irrelevant or even troubling to some readers, both in terms of repertoire and setting.⁶ For instance, these performers are likely, by virtue of the environment in which they work, to have access to music tuition and performance spaces largely unavailable to less privileged cohorts. I nevertheless hope to show how, through techniques not unrelated to those used by ethnomusicologists to study distant peoples and musics, it is possible to unearth unexpected aspects of a musical practice located much closer to home.⁷ Additionally, the findings of this study are a preserving jar for anyone who might in future want insight into a specific aspect of the fast-eroding landscape of twenty-first-century classical amateur music making, much as someone

⁴ See Ian Pace, *Music in Higher Education 1: Departments and Facilities* (2023), <https://ianpace.wordpress.com/2023/04/23/music-in-uk-higher-education-1-departments-and-faculties/> accessed 12 May 2024.

⁵ Alison Daubney, Gary Spruce and Deborah Annettes, *Music Education: State of the Nation: Report by the All Parliamentary Group for Music Education, the Incorporated Society of Musicians, and the University of Sussex* (2019), Retrieved from <https://www.ism.org/images/images/State-of-the-Nation-Music-Education-WEB.pdf>; Adam Whittaker, Martin Fautley, Victoria Kinsella, & Anthony Anderson, *Geographical and social demographic trends of A-level music students: report for Royal College of Music and Royal Academy of Music* (2019), retrieved on 29 October, 2024 from <https://researchonline.rcm.ac.uk/id/eprint/502/>.

⁶ See, for instance, Richard Taruskin in Christopher Chowrimootoo and Kate Guthrie (Convenors), John Howland, Andrew Flory, Chris McDonald, Heather Wiebe and Richard Taruskin, 'Colloquy: Musicology and the Middlebrow', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 73/2 (2020), 327–395, doi: 10.1525/jams.2020.73.327

⁷ For an early study taking this approach, see Laudan Nooshin, ed. *The Ethnomusicology of Western Art Music* (London: Routledge, 2014).

might wish to understand how the role of intimate piano performance affected the fate of Jane Austen's heroines and their real-life contemporaries.⁸

Probing the Interior

The interior world of the piano club members is explored here through the lens of what is known in the social sciences as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). I have advocated elsewhere for the benefits of IPA as a qualitative interviewing technique in musicology,⁹ so will not provide a detailed account of my methodology here but instead comment briefly on those characteristics making it particularly appropriate for this study. IPA was designed to deal sensitively with deeply personal and intimate issues that might otherwise go unquestioned or unobserved. It is phenomenological in that it aspires to engage with the participants' personal and subjective experience of something they find highly significant. It was obvious to me that the piano club was very important to its members: they said so, and they devoted a lot of time to it even when working long hours in their day job. Secondly, IPA is idiographic, meaning it makes a detailed examination of a small, homogeneous sample. It does not seek to prove a hypothesis or create quantitative evidence (any more than most musicological writing does). Instead, it delves into the experience of a few fairly similar participants to see how what is learnt may relate to prior research or generate new thinking. Finally, it engages in a 'double hermeneutic', acknowledging that the researcher can only access a participant's experience through their own. This was particularly important for the current study given my dual status as both an insider (lawyer) and outsider (musician).

There are many variants of IPA but the steps the researcher goes through follow essentially the same order.¹⁰ First a research question is formulated; this needs to be as

⁸ As in Gillian Dooley, 'Jane Austen: The Musician as Author', *Humanities*, 11/3 (2022), 73.

⁹ Esther Cavett (2024). "'The Mind is not Limited by the Skin'": the Expert Piano Technician's Experience of Working on Pianos of Professional Concert Performers', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 149/2 (2024), doi: 10.1017/rma.2024.26.

¹⁰ For examples, see Dennis Howitt, *Introduction to Qualitative Methods in Psychology*, 4th ed. (Harlow, England: Pearson, 2019); Igor Pietkiewicz and Jonathan Smith, 'A Practical Guide to Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in Qualitative Research Psychology', *Psychological Journal*,

open as possible to reflect the fact that the researcher is keeping an open mind regarding findings. Next the researcher creates a sampling plan. In the present study I identified my 'sample' by asking the piano club administrator to approach current members of the club with a request to contact me if they were willing to be interviewed for this study. The initial sample thus consisted of five respondents to that request, aged between 30 and 68. Next a semi-structured interview schedule is created in order to explore the research question. Questions asked are open, encouraging participants to speak without 'leading' them, and prompts might be used seek out further detail. Examples of interview questions used for this study are set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Examples of Questions Asked

Introductory
Can you give me two or three examples of experiences of music — of any kind — which were particularly meaningful to you prior to starting piano lessons in the office?
Experiential
Could you think back to your last piano lesson? Now, if you remember, please could you describe how you felt when opened the door to teaching room to begin the lesson?
What do your piano lessons mean to you?

All interviews are recorded and transcribed. Next, one transcript is analysed in detail in order to identify main themes and connections between them. First, the identification is done informally, by means of marginal notes. Figure 1, below, shows some marginal notes from my analysis. Only after one transcript has been carefully considered are other transcripts reviewed in order to identify further connections and potential hierarchies as they emerged inductively from the data. The process of identification involves reflection, review, and constant reordering of ideas until categories emerge. Some of this

20/1 (2014), 7-14; Jonathan Smith, Paul Flowers and Michael Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2009).

process is captured in Figure 2, below. The final stage of the analysis is the identification of main themes, each of which carry within them subsidiary themes. Figure 3, below, shows the four main themes emerging from my analysis, derived from interview data from all five of participants. In common with many qualitative researchers, I used the NVivo software programme¹¹ to facilitate analysis that would otherwise have been done manually. For the purpose of illustration, I draw in this article on data from the two interviews of Xanthe and Yolanda. These are pseudonyms to protect identity. IPA considers that using exact quotation from transcripts gives direct access to the 'lived experience' of the participants,¹² so this approach is taken in what follows. Ethical approval for undertaking the interviews was given by King's College London. As I was writing this article, thus some years after the initial interviews, I approached the one piano club teacher I still had contact details for to seek her comments on my findings, called here Maria. She was therefore not part of the formal interview process, but rather a commentator on the results.

¹¹ NVivo, accessed at www.lumivero.com.

¹² Jonathan Smith, 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Getting at Lived Experience', *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12/3 (2017), 303–304, doi: 10.1080/17439760.2016.126262.

Figure 1: Stage one: example annotations to the transcripts and identifications of possible themes (extracted from the software programme NVivo referenced above):

The screenshot shows the NVivo software interface for a project named 'Adult performers'. The top menu bar includes Home, Create, Data, Analyze, Query, Explore, Layout, and View. Below the menu is a toolbar with icons for Open, Get Info, Edit, Paste, Cut, Copy, and Merge. A search bar is located on the right side of the toolbar. The main workspace is divided into a left sidebar and a central table.

The left sidebar contains a tree view of the project structure:

- DATA**
 - Files
 - File Classifications
 - Externals
- CODES**
 - Nodes
 - Autocoded Resp...
- CASES**
 - Cases
 - Case Classifications
- NOTES**
 - Memos
 - Annotations (highlighted)
 - Memo Links
- SEARCH**
 - Queries
 - Query Results
 - Node Matrices
 - Sets
- MAPS**
 - Maps

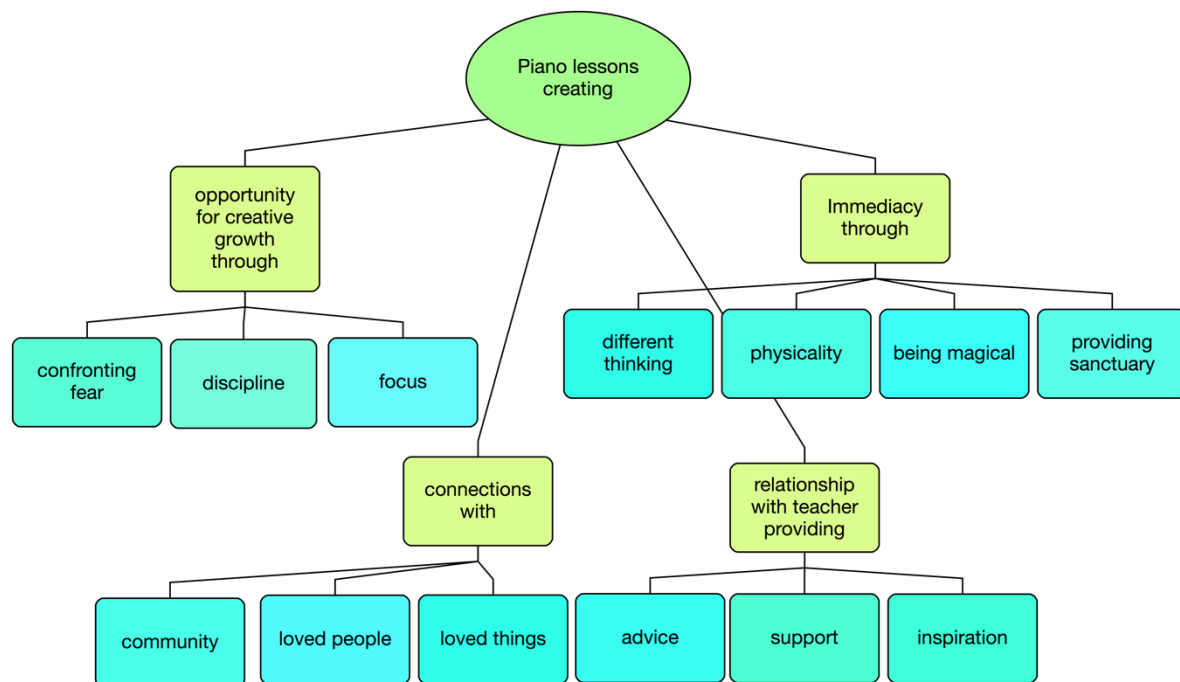
The central table displays a list of annotations with their corresponding counts:

Annotation	#
Self assessment is of minimal musical training at school, though enjoyed the few lesso...	1
Grandmother had piano at her house and X was amazed at her grandmonther playing....	2
Amazement at creation of sound on a piano as a child; loving trying to imiatate the sou...	3
Playing with sound as child	4
Emphasizes the magical quality. She was 'mesmerized'. Aspiration to do something si...	5
need to be constantly available for work	6
trust in the judgement of the music club committee	7
Nervousness. High standards and feeling guilty if hasn't practised	8
Skill of teacher very much crucial to the experience	9
The skill of teacher mentioned again. "Like a friend". Calming	10
Frustration at not having enough time to practise but accepting that this isn't her fault.	11
X is moved by the skill of the teacher performing to her. The teacher provides a role m...	12
she is moved not on the intellectual level but on the visceral level	13
Music lessons help X feel more tranquil	14
Music room is a safe harbour like a sanctuary	15
Again physical description -- sweating like a beast; release; feeling really good.	16
Utter focus required to play is valued	17
Dramatic highs and lows of doing exams. thinking in extremes but as something to be...	18
self discipline involved in practising	19
Need to get permission to do things (see earlier comment about piano club 'approving...	20
the excitement of creation and piecing the music together through hard work	21
feeling self-conscious and judged (query how the experience of piano playing will refle...	22
using music to support others (helping nephew). Allows her to perform a mothering role	23
music as visceral pleasure and point of personal connection for her autistic nephew	24
music's effect on the body through dance tunes. I feel invincible.	25
Piano lessons are joyous and transformative	26
loss of physical control playing in public; like having a heart attack	27
loss of control whilst playing	28
supportive non judgemental environment of the performances	29

Figure 2: Stage two: transforming notes into emergent themes



Figure 3: Four main themes and their subsidiary themes (image downloaded from NVivo)



Though the two participants worked in the same office, neither they nor I knew each other personally prior to the formation of the piano club. Xanthe was an accountant in her forties, with a responsible job managing the firm's balance sheet and overseeing payroll, and Yolanda a lawyer in her sixties just recently retired from the firm having been a senior manager. They had quite different musical backgrounds. Xanthe had no regular individual instrumental tuition prior to joining the piano club and her childhood class music lessons were 'once a week, in which, bless him, our teacher tried to inspire us. You know—getting us to sing, play the triangle, that sort of thing'. The school nevertheless offered something akin to a 'lightbulb moment' for Xanthe. She recalled a school trip to the Royal Albert Hall in London to see a symphony where she was 'just mesmerised. The sound – I thought, "Wow, this is so good"'. Another positive formative experience was her grandmother, who played the piano and did all her exams'. Xanthe remembered how 'as grandchildren we would hear her and I thought, "my God that's amazing! How does she create this?"'. Xanthe loved having 'a little tinkle' on her grandmother's piano as a child but did not have formal piano tuition as a child or teenager, preferring sport. In contrast, Yolanda's mother had been a piano student at the Royal Academy of Music in London. She remembered a 'tradition' of home performing when her parents used to 'sing and play together' and she 'had a lot of fun

with friends larking around with piano and playing bits of things'. She had regular piano lessons from the age of seven until she left school, alongside her main academic studies.

Plates 1, 2, and 3 contextualize the setting in which these participants worked and went to find their piano teacher. They left their office in a glass tower block, took a lift to the ground floor, walked across an impersonal granite foyer towards a chunky, hidden door embedded in a tall wall. A silver plaque identifying 'the music room' was positioned next to the door, that had to be pushed firmly to open, then the pupil stepped across the threshold, into an artificially lit, private space containing a small grand piano. Of course, each reader response to this invocation will be different, potentially raising questions about identity and power since most consumers of this publication will not have experienced working in such an environment. I return to consider generalised applicability of this study at my conclusion.

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Plates 1, 2, and 3: Pictures of office and music room, included with permission from the law firm where the piano lessons took place. The posters on the piano room wall are a reminder of the lunchtime concerts put on at the firm.





Results and Discussion

Four main themes were identified: piano lessons creating (i) opportunity for artistic growth, (ii) a special relationship with their teacher, (iii) a sense of connection, and (iv) a feeling of immediacy. As mentioned above, these themes, together with their subsidiary components, are represented diagrammatically in Figure 3. Many readers of this journal will have taken performance studies to a reasonably high level as part of their musical training, and might therefore find these results unsurprising, but the adults interviewed for this study identified primarily not as musicians but as businesspeople, working long hours, in a stressful office environment, so such findings were not a foregone conclusion. Each theme is considered individually in what follows.

Theme 1: Piano lessons creating opportunity for artistic growth through discipline, focus, and confronting fear: ‘my heart rate goes through the roof’.

Artistic growth might be expected to emanate from behaviours associated with freedom and spontaneity,¹³ but the path to creativity for Xanthe and Yolanda was instead through discipline, focus, and overcoming fear. Despite her lack of prior formal musical training, Xanthe made rapid progress ‘from complete beginner to grade eight¹⁴ in about six years’. Yolanda, who had rarely played for 40 years prior to joining the piano club, took grade eight in her last year at the firm, ‘so, I practised very hard for that’. When she retired, she continued to learn privately with the piano club teacher, practising ‘around four or five hours a day’ in order to pass her piano diploma. Such achievements take a high level of commitment that would be unsustainable without some motivating factor,¹⁵ as was acknowledged by them both. Xanthe explained that she responded well to an external challenge, such as an exam, when she would make sure to find the time for practice: ‘any opportunity I sort of think “Oh my God, I’ve got 15 minutes”, so I think, “Maybe I can sit down and do a scale” . . . you know, you’re thinking, “I want to achieve this. I need a goal” ((giggles)). I need a goal, and once I’ve got that then I know I will make the time’. Yolanda echoed these sentiments: ‘I try and do it [practise] earlier in the day than later because then it happens. It is too easy for it to get pushed out by other things. And then it helps having a deadline, so of course you know you put in a bit of extra welly, so you don’t fall flat on your face in front of other people’. Yolanda, like Xanthe, was strategic about her learning, understanding that the end result may require prior effort: ‘it is not enjoyable to play the same phrase 20 times over you know, um, even though I know it is good for me. If I really concentrate, you know, once I’ve done it correctly 20 times, it is going to be much more reliable. But you can’t really describe that as pleasurable. But you just know it has got to be done’.

¹³ David Preiss, Diego Cosmelli and James Kaufman, *Creativity and the Wandering Mind: Spontaneous and Controlled Cognition* (Academic Press, 2020).

¹⁴ The system of grades referred to here is that of the examinations of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (www.abrsm.org).

¹⁵ See, for instance, John Sturzaker and Alex Lord, ‘Fear: An Underexplored Motivation for Planners’ Behaviour?’, *Planning Practice & Research*, 33/4 (2018), 359–371, doi: 10.1080/02697459.2017.1378982.

If the principle of delayed gratification¹⁶ is implicit in the preceding examples, it is even stronger in the final sub-category of 'confronting fear'. Delayed gratification is the process whereby enjoyment of something is increased by making it harder to attain. Xanthe told me: 'Looking back now, round the exam time, I went a bit crazy for the exams. I'm not very good in an exam situation'. She commented that when she performed in the piano club concerts her 'heart rate goes through the roof'. Yolanda was more contained, but still acutely aware of the stress involved in performing: 'Yes, I do get nervous . . . Yes, it is interesting, isn't it? I think there is a bit of showmanship, an enjoyment of performing. You could say that is what mergers and acquisition lawyers do [this was the kind of corporate law she did for a living]'. She continued: 'When I sit down at the keyboard [to perform], I tend to think, "Just get a grip. You can do this"'. Breathing helps a lot; [and as she mimes the action of deep breathing] just making sure you're managing your breathing. Both participants, who had to be extremely restrained and controlled in their day jobs, recognised they lost physiological control over the heart (Xanthe) or breath (Yolanda) when under pressure. Despite these challenges, both participants continued to take exams and play in informal concerts and felt a continuing sense of achievement and fulfilment in doing so.

The preceding quotations illustrate how each participant was motivated to find time in their full-time working day to practise and made outstanding musical progress. They were both goal-driven and they were willing to be pushed in order to develop as musicians and performers. There is an abundance of literature showing that these attributes match the personality types typical of people working in a challenging professional environment such as the law firm in question.¹⁷ Many performing musicians share the same traits of hard work, focus and dedication, and these are useful transferrable skills, as discussed in Theresa Kim's study of performers who retrained in order to follow alternative careers.¹⁸

¹⁶ Adelina Gschwandtner, Sarah Jewell and Uma Kambhampati, 'Lifestyle and Life Satisfaction: The Role of Delayed Gratification', *J Happiness Stud* 23 (2022), 1043–1072, doi: 10.1007/s10902-021-00440-y.

¹⁷ See Madeleine Deveson, 'The "Lawyer Personality" and the Five Factor Model: Implications from Personality Neuroscience (2012), retrieved from <http://www.civiljustice.info/neuro> regarding lawyers; regarding accountants see Stacey Kovar, Richard Ott and Dann Fisher, D. G., 'Personality Preferences of Accounting Students: A Longitudinal Case Study', *Journal of Accounting Education*, 21/2 (2003), 75–94.

¹⁸ Theresa Ja-Young Kim, *The Impacts of High-Level Training: Five Musicians Who Transferred Their Skills to New Professions* (Doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 2018) accessed <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D8XW5X9G>.

Theme 2: Piano lessons creating a relationship with the teacher providing advice, support, and inspiration: ‘an opportunity to have a sophisticated discussion about a piece of music with someone who knows much more than I will ever know’.

Crucial to participants’ experience of their piano lessons in the office was their relationship with their teacher, who provided advice, support, and inspiration. Xanthe was the one who was less sure of her ability, often asking the teacher questions such as: ‘will I be able to do it?’ Yolanda, in contrast, enjoyed spending a ‘lot of time talking’ about more technical aspects she found challenging. Despite their different confidence levels, the teacher Maria treated all her pupils with equal respect, creating a pedagogical approach that varied according to their individual interests and strengths. She felt she needed to ‘teach everyone very differently, depending on the person. I have to find the connection or people won’t come back’. She engaged them by offering an appropriate challenge: ‘when I see them, I don’t try to make it easy. I . . . still want a good result, I’m trying to help them achieve the most and the best. I think that is why it works, because on the level they are at they can do their best’. It was clear Xanthe understood this: ‘She [Maria] is very keen that you get the best out of yourself’.

Both participants felt appreciated as individuals. Yolanda described lessons as providing ‘a supportive environment, which is how people do their best’. Xanthe wanted very much to play particular pieces with important personal associations, and this motivation was validated by Maria, who told me that ‘If someone says they really love a piece, I will always agree they should learn it. I never say, “that’s too hard”’. The relationship between teacher and pupil became mutually stimulating. Maria described her students as ‘curious, clever people. They can see through you – you have to grow and deliver’. She told me ‘I was very surprised when people said to me “thank you so much I really enjoyed this lesson”. I had thought I was just giving a piano lesson’. She did not realise how she beguiled her students. Xanthe told me how: ‘she sits down and plays to me, and it can sometimes almost make me feel I want to cry because she is so adept, so skilful’. Yolanda described her lessons as: ‘an opportunity to have a sophisticated discussion about a piece of music with someone who knows much more than I will ever know and whose ability to play the keyboard is infinitely superior to anything I will ever attain’.

The ingredients for a healthy relationship between teacher and music student have been explored extensively.¹⁹ For instance, Margaret Barrett's '12 strategies' for teaching include encouraging goal setting, questioning purpose, providing reassurance and giving permission to change, strategies that are shown abundantly in the transcripts of my study. The same values also apply to other successful pedagogical relationships and, more broadly, as identified in the developmental psychology literature, to the skills of good parenting and how good parenting can support future development.²⁰ It is notable, however, that musicking in this context involved the given of a teacher-pupil structure, and that notions of challenge and progress are thus a given. Before entering into it, students already know the rules of engagement. There are of course many other ways musicking can take place—gospel choirs, folk ensembles, jazz jamming, for instance. As further examined in my conclusion, it seems that the club was conceived and structured as a product of a specific 'culture'. For instance, I did not consider when I was still a lawyer, or even when I did my initial analysis, if there were other kinds of musicking that HR would have been more hesitant to fund, or whether it is possible to learn something about what HR mean by 'wellbeing' from looking at the club.

¹⁹ Margaret Barrett, "'Creative Collaboration': An 'Eminence' Study of Teaching and Learning in Music Composition', *Psychology of Music*, 34/2 (2006), 195-218; Susan Hallam, 'What Predicts Level of Expertise Attained, Quality of Performance, and Future Musical Aspirations in Young Instrumental Players?', *Psychology of Music*, 41/3 (2011), 267–291.

²⁰ Joan Newman, Gozu Hamide, Shyui Guan, Xain Lee and Yuriko Sasaki, 'Relationship Between Maternal Parenting Style and High School Achievement and Self-Esteem in China, Turkey and U.S.A', *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 46/2 (2015), 265-288.

Theme 3: Piano lessons creating connections with a community, loved people, and loved things: ‘fellow performers are nice people. They are not there to stick pins in you’.

Members of the piano club came from many different parts of a large law firm with over 3000 lawyers and many non-legal administrative staff contained in a single tower block in the Canary Wharf district of London. The hierarchies within such an organization are real to those who work there but incomprehensible to outsiders. They are referred to here only in order to highlight the egalitarianism created within the piano club, where friendships were made connecting people across generations, job roles, and levels of seniority, and everyone who played in the informal concerts was treated with respect and care by their fellow performers. Additionally, all who took lessons were equal in the eyes of the teacher who was an outsider to the organization visiting from an entirely different world (a point explored more specifically later). The benefits of community music making have been explored extensively²¹ but not typically in the context of a busy professional environment such as depicted in the current study.

Xanthe vividly described her vulnerability in the moment of performance: ‘I was fine up to about the second page and then, all of a sudden, I felt, “Oh my God, I’m out of control . . . I’ve lost complete focus”, and I had to stop’. What might in other circumstances have felt impossibly daunting became a positive experience due to the response of her audience, however: ‘People said, “Oh, let everyone [else] play and then go back and try again. We will be pottering around outside the music room, and we will be doing this and that, and we won’t be listening to you and then you can do it”. And everyone was really trying to encourage me’. She found concerts to be ‘about celebrating people . . . everyone is thinking, “Well, good luck to them, trying something new and doing something for yourself”. They were genuinely interested in your journey in what you were trying to achieve. So, you didn’t feel at all embarrassed about how well or badly you played. You want to achieve what you are capable of’. Yolanda was less daunted by performing in public, possibly due to having had more experience of it in earlier life, finding she was ‘quite good at keeping going, you know, no matter what!

²¹ See for instance, Ola Ekholm, Knud Juel and Lars Bonde, ‘Associations Between Daily Musicking and Health: Results from a Nationwide Survey in Denmark’, *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health* 44/7 (2016), 726-732; Susan Maury and Nikki Rickard, ‘A Comparison of the Effects of Short-Term Singing, Exercise, and Discussion Group Activities on the Emotional State and Social Connectedness of Older Australians [E-Journal]’, *Music & Science* 1 (2018), 205920431880060.

((mimes gritted teeth)). So, so far, I've never had an implosion!'. However, she found playing in front of work colleagues challenging: 'If you're never going to see people again, you know, the loss of face involved is not nearly so huge ((chuckles)). But playing in front of people you know, ummmmm!'. Her way of managing this was pragmatic: she got 'quite, you know, focused on the prep'. She did so by playing 'to hapless passers-by, like members of my family and my cleaning lady. All sorts. You know you might think you know something, that you've got something completely nailed. But under the extra pressure of performing in front of someone, something can go'. She especially enjoyed performing duets in the concerts describing them 'like a good conversation' not only with her duet partner but with the listeners. 'Fellow performers are nice people' she said, 'they are not there to stick pins in you'.

It seems that informal concerts brought together members of the piano club in a shared, supportive endeavour. They were willing to take risks, knowing that if they slipped up they would be supported not judged. Through this process, they became more confident of themselves in front of people they might see again in the workplace. Appropriating Tim Rice's words on the role of music in constructing identity, these performances 'provide the opportunity for [a community] sharing an identity to see themselves in action and to imagine others who might share the same style of performance'²². He describes this process as 'authoring the self through music'.²³ The piano club, however, offered a further enhancement: the chance for those involved to 're-author' themselves as performing musicians but, additionally, relief from their everyday professional identities. Apart from the immediate and obvious social benefits experienced, participants revealed connections of a less tangible and more intimate nature that were themselves often interrelated: connections with the pianos they played and with people associated with those pianos. One senior lawyer involved with the piano club became particularly attached to the piano in the office, describing what she felt for the piano as 'love'. Though she had a reasonable electric keyboard at home, she travelled to the office at weekends to play the piano there and sometimes brought her own cleaning materials, to dust and polish the piano and make it look good. Xanthe and Yolanda were more attached to the pianos they played at home because they represented a loved person. Yolanda owned a Bösendorfer grand piano that she was 'very fond of'. She said this was 'I think in large part because it is the piano I grew up with'. I sensed I was hearing a favourite family story when she told me how 'My mother

²² Tim Rice, 'Reflections on Music and Identity in Ethnomusicology', in *Modeling Ethnomusicology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). Web.

²³ Ibid.

bought it from Harrods. It was a reconditioned piano, made in the 1920s and she spent practically all she had to buy it, and my father, who was a very, um, a rather down to earth civil engineer, apparently told her he thought she was absolutely mad. And I sort of think, you know, I just . . . so I think it is just great that my mother said, you know, “sod it, I’m going to buy it”. The piano was meaningful to Yolanda because it was part of her history: ‘I grew up with it and it has had work done to its interior, at least twice since, once by my mother, once by me. So, we’ve nurtured it’. Accordingly, ‘while my mother is alive, I wouldn’t change it for anything’.

Yolanda again said she ‘loved’ her ‘black lacquer’ upright piano standing in the corner of her living room. ‘It is funny because everything else is so cream, it really stands out. It pops. The black!’. Her happy childhood experience of playing her grandmother’s piano was related earlier. When her grandmother died and left her some money, Yolanda used it to buy her own instrument. ‘I thought of my memories of Nan, her playing the piano ((pause)). I thought ((pause)), I always feel like, that’s Nan. She would love this. I just think the piano is her.’ The piano was the medium through which she could still reach her grandmother. It also created intimate communication between her and her autistic nephew.²⁴ He ‘puts his ear down next to the keys.... With autistic children, you know sometimes their eye contact isn’t great, but he looks at me ((mimes excited face and fascination)). ... I haven’t got my own children so I think “Oh my God, I can invest all my energies into him”’. Yolanda shared another intimate detail with me: she told me she kept a framed picture of her parents on top of the piano, so they looked over her while she practised. She recorded her practice sessions and played them to her parents when they visited, thus doubly validating her performances, whilst protecting herself from having to play live even to her relatives.

The piano provides ritual, meaning, and is the medium through which multiple generational connections are recollected and forged. The experiences of both Yolanda and Xanthe invoke specific female antecedents (the mother, the grandmother) whose agency is exerted through the instruments my interviewees play in their domestic environments. As Bates put it, instruments can ‘enchant subsequent generations’.²⁵

²⁴ For further on the benefits of music in relation to autism, see Adam Ockelford, *Music, Language and Autism: Exceptional Strategies for Exceptional Minds* (London/Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2013).

²⁵ Eliot Bates, ‘The Social Life of Musical Instruments’, *Ethnomusicology*, 56/3 (2012), 363-395.

Clearly the piano is anything but a neutral participant in the world of music constructed by these office-working pianists.

Theme 4: Piano lessons creating a sense of immediacy through engendering a different kind of thinking, physicality, feeling magical, and offering sanctuary: 'there's a sort of intensity to the concentration'.

Though the relationship to the piano teacher is clearly of central importance to the participants, other aspects of their experience existed independently of that relationship, particularly the enlivening of familial connections through the piano itself, mentioned earlier. The experience of 'immediacy' was also a distinct factor. The ingredients of this fourth theme were all about changed experience. Xanthe told me that the piano lessons '[are] making me think in a different way'. She described returning to her desk following a piano lesson and solving a problem she previously found intractable. Yolanda contrasted a slight verbal stumble when she was explaining a legal point to a client in a meeting, 'which most people would not even notice' with playing, '[where] every note counts. So, there is a sort of intensity to the concentration'. The intensity of mental focus was matched by equal physical engagement. Xanthe said that at the end of a lesson she was often: 'sweating like a beast' and she reported her intense somatic response while her teacher played: 'I know it sounds weird, but where the piano is located—in a quite high room, and the acoustic . . . the reverberations just go through you. It is a physical thing'. Yolanda, always more understated, nevertheless said that lessons 'left me buzzing', a very bodily description. She later mentioned the visceral contact with the piano: 'there was something very satisfying about digging into the keys'. And she found playing the piano being 'physically as well as mentally engaging . . . Brains, hands, feet . . . It is quite a lot to manage!'.

By becoming totally absorbed both mentally and physically, something magical happened. Xanthe described learning the piano as 'transformative' and Yolanda noted that 'it was lovely to have the chance to spend time with these young women [teachers] who were so talented and came from a completely different universe from the one I'd inhabited'. Their experience was of having been touched by something other-worldly. This change in psychological orientation was paralleled by a literal physical separation from the office as they entered the music room. Xanthe said: 'The music room is a little sanctuary' because it was secluded and safe from prying ears and eyes where she could be herself and not be overheard by anyone except the trusted teacher. Yolanda

considered 'It was just lovely to have time out and focus on something completely different', thus referring to being transported from the real world into a special space. The teacher, Maria, also commented on the fact that, though she preferred a lighter, open aspect offered, when for a short time the lessons were relocated to a room with large glass windows facing a path outside the building, she noticed how her pupils found the exposure challenging.

Transcendence and escape through listening to and performing music is a familiar trope in both popular and academic writing on music,²⁶ but in this study it is the contrasts and connections between the occasion of the musical engagement and its wider context that seems most telling. The world outside the music room required analysis of complex information under pressure, often without time to reflect and refine and with potentially vicious reprisal (lawsuits, loss of reputation or job) should the analysis be wrong. Fear of judgement and failure stalked the corridors outside the music room. In contrast, piano lessons took participants out of time, fully engaging all their senses. Lessons created an embodied sense of immediacy, and provided release from daily worries and preoccupations, even if the act of musicking brought its own challenges to be overcome. The very experience of *experimenting* with freedom, daring to fail—the frisson of the performer's tightrope in the safe space of the music room, was somehow deliciously transgressive.²⁷

Standing Back: If Only the Piano Could Speak

Qualitative analysis requires themes identified to be situated within a theoretical context in order to offer interpretative power.²⁸ Each of the four main themes identified

²⁶ For examples of the latter, see Judith Becker, *Deep listeners: Music, Emotion and Trancing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004) and Alf Gabrielsson, 'Music and transcendence' in *Strong Experiences with Music: Music is Much More than Just Music* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), 159-170, both of which can now be informed by neuroscience studies such as Lawrence Sherman and Dennis Plies, *Every Brain Needs Music: The Neuroscience of Making and Listening to Music* (New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2023).

²⁷ For a history of 'the perverse desire for the hermit's cell' that pursues this line of thinking, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, 'Solitude' in *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 54-77.

²⁸ Summarised in Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3/2 (2006), 77-101, 94.

in this study has been contextualised within existing research, but they have not yet been considered collectively. Doing so offers further insight into why the piano lessons are so valued in the lives of participants since, together, the themes identified in this IPA map onto categories identified as being most beneficial in a therapeutic (counselling) relationship. This correlation is something that only revealed itself towards the end of analysing the collected data, as one can expect from the inductive process.

The relationship to the teacher (Theme 2), providing advice, support, and inspiration, parallels the importance of quality of the ‘therapeutic alliance’, as it referred to, between clinician and patient.²⁹ This alliance, requiring empathy and warmth and the creation of a ‘holding’ environment,³⁰ is central to the success of the therapeutic relationship irrespective of the kind of therapy (existential, humanist, cognitive-behaviouralist and so on) being undertaken.³¹ The importance of place cannot be underestimated in creating a sense of ‘immediacy’ (Theme 4) for both patient and pupil. Entry into the sanctuary that is for the patient the therapist’s couch and for the pupil the enclosing, safe space of the music room, protected from the vicissitudes of the outside world, leads to heightened physical and mental awareness. Having a safe place helps the patient to form a healthy attachment to the therapist.³² This wholesome relationship, in turn, provides a secure foundation for ‘artistic growth’ (Theme 1), enabling the patient to confront fear, and develop the discipline and focus for self-actualisation to occur. Perhaps the piano is ideal for this process, since its own social history is one of development towards autonomy both in design, the iron frame liberating it to fill large public spaces, and execution, with the rise of nineteenth-century virtuoso performers.³³ Finally, a more fully-realised concept of self, developed through therapy, helps the patient forge connections with people they love, community and valued physical things. This replicates the ingredients of Theme 3, since piano lessons, as this study has shown,

²⁹ Alexandra Bachelor and Adam Horvath, ‘The Therapeutic Relationship’, in *The Heart and Soul of Change: What Works in Therapy*, ed. Mark A. Hubble, Barry L. Duncan and Scott D. Miller (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1999), 133-178.

³⁰ Stephen Hyman, ‘The School as a Holding Environment’, *Journal of Infant, Child, and Adolescent Psychotherapy*, 11/3 (2012), 205-216.

³¹ Jeremy Safran and John Muran, *Negotiating the therapeutic alliance: A relational treatment guide* (New York, NY: Guilford, 2000); M.J. Lambert and D.E Barley, ‘Research Summary on the Therapeutic Relationship and Psychotherapy Outcome’, *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 38/4 (2001), 357–361, doi: 10.1037/0033-3204.38.4.357.

³² John Bowlby, J., *A Secure Base: Clinical applications of Attachment Theory* (London: Routledge, 2005).

³³ Arthur Loesser, *Men, Women and Pianos: A Social History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954); James Parakilas (ed), *Piano Roles* (New Haven and London: Yale Nota Bene, Yale University Press, 2022).

create and enhance connections to communities and loved ones, as participants' confidence in their musical performance and communication skills grow.

I pause now to consider the consequences of developing this study over time. Having completed the initial thematic analysis several years after I had finished work as a lawyer, I continued my own intellectual journey back into academia before returning to reconsider my findings. The piano club is to me now a bright, distant place, in which a version of myself I (captured — a Barthesian *punctum* — in the mirror in Plate 3)³⁴ hardly recognise facilitates lessons and informal concerts on the basis of an ideology inherited from the 1980s, and now largely discredited in the current music educational climate. The original interview data of course helped root my investigation in the reality of the participants' reported experience, but my understanding of that data changed over time. In particular, the interplay between the office and the piano room was far more subtle than I had realised.

As someone with many years of musical training who chose to curtail uncertain prospects in music employment in favour of the stability of a legal career, I knew back then why I continued to idealise the world of the expert piano performer, and indeed to study the piano privately with a senior conservatoire teacher through more than half of my time in the law. I was, however, initially surprised to discover that my work colleagues without prior professional training in music might strive towards similar ideals of transcendence through hours of focussed labour at the keyboard. I now realise that my colleagues' freedom from the pressures of their daytime existence was achieved through exactly the same kind of skills as were required of them in the workplace. The piano, hidden in a secluded room, was arguably exactly the right instrument to provide a safe harbour for their exhausted minds, requiring almost devotional physical, emotional, and intellectual commitment. Pressing this line of enquiry further might tell us something about how perceptions of piano culture as it emerged in the late German Enlightenment³⁵ and became encapsulated within nineteenth-century European bourgeois culture³⁶ have been absorbed into the values and behaviours of the professions from which, ostensibly, the piano club offered a 'creative' refuge. Perhaps,

³⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. R. Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), 116.

³⁵ Head, M., *Sovereign Feminine: Music and Gender in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2019).

³⁶ Christof Dejung, David Motadel and Jürgen Osterhammel, 'Worlds of the Bourgeoisie', in *The Global Bourgeoisie: The Rise of the Middle Classes in the Age of Empire*, ed. Christof Dejung, David Motadel and Jürgen Osterhammel (Princeton, NJ; online edn, Princeton Scholarship Online), 1-40.

indeed, my current understanding of my findings now challenges my own initial assumptions in setting up the club, as I have explained above.

Another consideration not brought out in my initial analysis of the interview data was that individual and collective music making might not always be beneficial or may even cause harm. Elizabeth McGregor shows how an individual's inherent and situational expectations interact with the institution in which the teaching is delivered, and, in turn, with social constructs governing that institution.³⁷ Sometimes these interactions lead to 'pathogenic vulnerability' through the individual being oppressed politically, ethically, or ideologically. In contrast to the school classroom (McGregor's focus), where music education is compulsory, membership of the piano club was voluntary and there was no pressure from the law firm to join it; indeed, it was considered a quaint and harmless pastime by those more interested in other kinds of collective leisure activities such as rugby or rowing. Nevertheless, those taking part in the club, including those interviewed, were self-selecting and I had no access to those who were systemically excluded. One striking exception to this happened when I was invited back to my firm for a lunch and food was served by a neat, uniformed woman. In uncertain English she quietly told me that she'd been a circus performer and keyboard player in her native Romania. She thanked me for helping her recreate the soundscape of her youth in the privacy of the piano room, once her late evening shift had finished. If only the piano could speak, I thought.

Future Directions and Conclusions

There are many issues referred to in this study that could be the subject of further investigation. As observed earlier, qualitative research is inductive: it explores data that can lead to the formulation of a hypothesis to be tested quantitatively. Amongst the possible questions that could be investigated through a larger, quantitative study could be whether the positive emotional benefits reported by the participants relate more to their interaction with their teacher than to learning the piano, or the repertoire they choose to play. Amongst the variables that would need to be controlled for are the size and kind of room the lessons took place in, the personality, age, and sex of the participant, and extent of prior musical training. Secondly, this study shows some of the

³⁷ Elizabeth H. MacGregor, 'Conceptualizing Musical Vulnerability', *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 30/1 (2022), 24-43. Web.

benefits of learning, practising, and performing a solo musical instrument; however, similar benefits could flow from learning other skills, such as football or dance (examples of group learning) or chess (individual learning). Thirdly, it might be interesting to explore how the skills developed through involvement with the piano club, such as greater confidence, better communication, finer motor control, and postural awareness, carried back into participants' day jobs. Fourthly, the flow from mind (and emotion) to body and instrument described so vividly by some interviewees can be situated within the growing field in musicology of the study of music and the body.³⁸ For instance, Keith Negus and Patricia Román Velazquez, writing as sociologists and cultural historians of popular music, advocate researching 'what is happening when music seems to connect with a sense of being external to or internal with the body'.³⁹

This study offers an account of what performing and learning music means for a class of students generally unknown to academics and policy makers concerned with UK music today. Arguably private music lessons are the preserve of the privileged and there are more urgent matters to research and report on⁴⁰. The piano, in particular, has for some taken on particularly unsavoury connotations, with ebony and ivory (whether or not actually used these days) symbolising oppression across continents and cultures.⁴¹ In any case, 'real' grand pianos are increasingly seen as fabulous and near-extinct leviathans sprawling across impossibly large and ornamental music rooms, and decent-quality electric alternatives are so often preferred in the domestic sphere.⁴² Accordingly, my subject is an unfashionable topic both for music pedagogy and mainstream academic musicology. I pursued it, nevertheless, in order to propose a modest reframing for how the Western musical canon can be studied today, though the eyes of those engaged in private and semi-private domestic music making. The results

³⁸ Youn Kim and Sander L. Gilman, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Music and the Body* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019).

³⁹ Keith Negus and Patricia Román Velazquez, 'Belonging and Detachment: Musical Experience and the Limits of Identity', *Poetics (Amsterdam)*, 30/1 (2002), 133–145, do: 10.1016/S0304-422X(02)00003-7.

⁴⁰ Important studies are to be found, for instance, on the websites of Arts Council England, The Association of British Orchestras, UK Music, and The Incorporated Society of Musicians.

⁴¹ Sean Murray, Pianos, Ivory, and Empire, *American Music Review*, Xxxviii/2 (2009), 1-5,13-14, retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/pianos-ivory-empire/docview/1845865318/se-2>

⁴² Marko Aho, "'Almost like the Real Thing": How does the Digital Simulation of Musical Instruments Influence Musicianship?", *Music Performance Research*, 3 (2009), 22-35. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/almost-like-real-thing-how-does-digital/docview/2082955138/se-2>

suggest it could be worth examining other pockets of amateur activity within the UK classical music ecology, for example, adult amateur orchestras, where the average age of attendance probably roughly matches the age of classical concert audiences.⁴³ The reasons why this kind of music making still goes on, the benefits it might bring, and how it might be revitalised to remain relevant in today's disparate soundscape are all topics that could be considered, and many practitioners are already doing excellent work in this area.⁴⁴

An important consideration was my own subject position amongst my interviewees as ex-colleague and now (ethno-)musicologist and outsider. Perhaps self-servingly, I heard how those working in the heart of the capitalist economy found a way to open themselves up to a different way of being through music lessons and performance, even if their quite formalised musicking subtly mimicked their capitalist ways. Of course, such transformative experiences are not confined to classical music performance, but that is precisely my point. The connections between different kinds of musical meaning-making are surely more profound than the differences between currently rival factions of the musical world. Such disciplinary infighting weakens the chances that music education and performance can be appropriately advocated for, to impact wider educational and political policy. The semi-structured format for interviews left it open to interviewees to consider how their activities were situated within a wider cultural context, but did not steer the conversation in any particular direction. Instead, what emerged was insight into the dynamics and sensory texture of their interior worlds. These performers had personal relationships with their pianos, caring for them, seeing them as embodying loved people; and whilst behaviour, language, and dress are highly constrained in the office, these people could take risks and risk failing as they learnt to be vulnerable in front of each other and their teacher. Relationality in classical music performance has been considered,⁴⁵ but this study considers relationality not of

⁴³ For instance, in 2018-19, 58% of audiences for classical music were over 65 (The Audience Agency. *Audience Finder Classical Music Audience Headlines*, 18/19 (2020)); and in 2021 the BBC Proms Concerts broadcast audience was assessed as 70% over 55 (BOP Consulting, *Research into the Classical Music Ecosystem*, prepared for the BBC (2022), <https://abo.org.uk/assets/files/News-and-Press/BBC-Classical-Music-Review-BOP-Consulting-March-May-2022.pdf?v=1678811834>), accessed 13 May 2024, 22).

⁴⁴ See for instance the websites of The Multi-story Orchestra (www.multistory.org) or The Aurora Orchestra (www.auroraorchestra.com)

⁴⁵ Amongst many others see Amanda Bayley, 'Ethnographic Research into Contemporary String Quartet Rehearsal', *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 20/3 (2011), 385–411, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41417556>; Tina K. Ramnarine, 'The Orchestration of Civil Society: Community and Conscience in Symphony Orchestras', *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 20/3 (2011), 327–351.

professionals but amateurs of various kinds—to themselves both individually and collectively and to their instruments.

Critically, it seems, the idea of piano lessons creating the opportunity to have ‘a good conversation’ between teacher and student dissolved the expected teacher-student hierarchy, and required a kind of listening quite different from the politics of voice in regular office work. The group performances, too, involved listeners being ‘present’ for each other, requiring group competence as much as individual skill. There was therefore some conceptual slippage between the ‘wrong note’ that would show in Yolanda’s piano performance yet could be glossed over in her informal conversation with a client and the terrifying wrong step that could be taken in advising that same client in formal legal proceedings. These are not the same kind of error. Yes, an unwitting slip in the workplace could cause significant reputational or financial loss but the other kind of mistake threatens the sanctuary of the piano room or the private concert performance. Whilst this study shows a constant and necessary interplay between the workplace and the piano club, it is perhaps not ultimately about that at all. Rather, it relates how these adult, non-professional performers played to be/come alive.

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