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Cultivating ambiguities within higher music education – preparation for singers' professional societal participation in opera conservatory and music theatre programs

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Abstract

Earlier research has stated the need for conservatory education to prepare aspiring musicians more thoroughly for a dynamic and changing society. A project that challenges the conservatory tradition is Samman Konst (TogetherArt) where students at a musical theatre program at folk high school level collaborate with intellectually disabled adults. Based on a phenomenological way of thinking, this article aims to describe and analyze the education of aspiring musicians for professional participation in society based on an analysis of experiences among conservatory students, music theater students and their teachers. Interviews were made with six conservatory students, 15 musical theatre students, and two teachers. The results show ambiguities when it comes to what voice students should be prepared for and how the choice of preparations influence the view of singing and musicians' quality competence.

Keywords: *voice students, singers and makers, cultivating ambiguity, quality competence*

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Previous research has stated the need for higher music education to prepare aspiring musicians exhaustively for a dynamic and changing society, concerning making higher music education (HME) more inclusive, as well as establishing relationships with and within society during their education (Hess, 2015). Hence, there is a need for new research methods that contribute to understanding current developments in teaching and learning; and what consequences different designs of professional educational programs have for societal work. Gaunt et al. (2021) stress the necessity of engaging in societal musical practices and argue for “systemic perspectives to make sense of contemporary complexities and enable appropriate change” (p. 3) regarding HME’s broader relationship to society. In this article, we take a closer look at the complexities as well as possibilities in higher music education (including folk high school¹ level) and specifically focus on the education of students of opera and musical theatre, through Simone de Beauvoir’s (1948) theory of ambiguity. We are aware that pedagogical approaches and didactic actions used within HME interplay with and influence (musical) life outside the educational institutions (Kingsbury, 1997). For instance, Bull (2019) states that schooling in classical music contributes to preservation of social classes. Another perspective on the relationship between higher music education and the music market is pointed out by Gaunt et al. (2021) who stress the importance of educating musicians who can act as makers in society. They state that there is a lack of content in current HME programs when it comes to societal awareness and social engagement, which they see as crucial for lifelong employability.

There are some examples of how collaborative and border-crossing projects within higher music education can produce insights in how to develop professional fields (Schippers, 2010; Minors et al., 2017; Westerlund & Gaunt, 2021). For example, Zhukov & Sætre (2022) explored how chamber music education could be organized as “learning through playing”. They found that students were inspired by working with experienced staff in a professional setting. Also, the students learned various ensemble playing skills such as effective rehearsal techniques, stylistic conventions, as well as specific technical, musical and co-ordination skills. In addition, the students experienced greater experimentation, positive impact of group discussions, and a more collaborative atmosphere than in their ordinary chamber music education. Coutts & Hill (2022) asked postgraduate students within an Australian conservatory about their perspectives on music’s role in social change. The students expressed an explicit desire to contribute to societal change, suggesting actions

1 Folk high schools or *adult education centres* run educational programs that are both preparing for higher education, and a professional life. Swedish folk high schools receive public funding from the Swedish government to support four goals: strengthening democracy, personal development, creating educational equality, and promoting interest and participation in culture. There are 156 folk high schools throughout the country, most of which are situated in the countryside, often in remote areas. Tuition is free, and the students are eligible for normal financial aid for expenses such as accommodation and other school costs. Students can either study for a general qualification, which makes them eligible to study at university, or a specific subject such as arts, crafts, film, theatre, music or design to gain practical experience.

such as more ownership over repertoire; including extra-musical features, for example collaborating with visual artists; musician dialogue within concerts or discussions with the audience; supporting messages on social media; or playing the music within the context of larger events relating to the social issue, and practising activism throughout their education. Consequently, the higher music education “recycling wheel”, that conserves roles and possibilities related to genre, class, ethnicity, and gender, could be challenged (Blix, Vestad & Onsrud, 2021). The recycling wheel refers to those established structures that for example predict what musicians are to do in their professional life, and are maintained as former students start to teach at conservatories with the same values their own teachers mediated. In this article we explore activities within two educational programs whose task is to educate musicians for a future society.

Ongoing research (Ferm Almqvist & Werner, 2023) in European conservatories has found that the preparations for, and students’ thoughts on, future working life vary greatly between departments. For instance, percussion students seem to be prepared for, encouraged, and willing to work as musicians in soloist, chamber music, and orchestral situations, with contemporary improvisation, as well as in non-governmental organizations (NGOs). One of them also mentioned a dream of starting a creative music school. Opera and musical theatre students in the same study were primarily more directed toward performing specific soloist parts in operas and operettas, combined with teaching advanced voice students on the side. A reason given for this was the view of singing dominating the conservatories where the participants studied. This view privileged opera singing solely, as more varied singing activities like chamber, pop, or choral singing were perceived as affecting the singing voice negatively. Although the present-day musical theatre profession has become more open towards performing more varied singing genres such as gospel, rock n’roll, pop, funk, world music, jazz, and rap, the singing ideal is still based on singing with a “legit voice” (von Germeten & Karlsen, 2022).² In contrast, research in the field of musical theatre research shows that it is crucial for American musical theatre artists to become “broad, hybrid and fragmented” or “omnivorous” singers (p.13), in order to be employable and successful in the profession. This means that musical theatre artists are expected to handle demands of singing in varied genres, styles and taste classifications; relate to the fluidity of changing musical styles and influences from other art fields; as well as being able to use certain elements within the same.

In this article we explore activities within two educational programs whose task is to educate professional voice musicians for a future society. Two forms of educational programs were chosen for this study, namely opera programs within three conservatories in Europe, and a musical theatre program within a folk high school in Sweden. Even if studies

2 Singing “with a legit voice” implies using “western lyrical, classical idioms, such as extended use of so-called head voice by all female singers singing above the note of A4 (American Standard Pitch Notation), and a frequent use of vibrato, modified vowels and portamenti” (von Germeten & Karlsen, 2022, p. 8).

at the folk high school level can help prepare for both higher education and a professional life, we chose to label both programs as higher education in this article.

Within the opera programs, the students take part in courses focusing on opera and chamber music, as well as ballet, and anatomy. No collaborative projects with the surrounding society were initiated or conducted by the conservatory at the time of the study. At the musical theatre program, the students study the foundations of musical theatre (singing, dancing, acting) but also other music related classes such as music history, and music theory. At the time of the study, the musical theatre students also took part in a project called *Sammankonst (TogetherArt)* in collaboration with intellectually disabled adults from a group within a non-governmental organization called *Fritid för alla (Spare Time for all)* managed by *Kulturverket*, a municipal arts organization. For three years the students co-created and performed a professional musical theatre production together with the participants from *Fritid för alla*. In this article, we analyze research material generated through interviews with opera students and teachers at three conservatories in Estonia, Hungary, and Finland, as well as research material developed among students and teachers in the music theatre program participating in *Sammankonst*. Both the opera programs and the musical theatre program aim to educating aspiring musicians for a professional musicianship as singers in society. Experiences from the two educational contexts are discussed in relation to each other and related to HME's responsibilities towards preparing music students for their future as professional musicians in a changing society.

Aim and research questions

Based on a phenomenological approach, this paper aims to describe and analyze higher music education activities in educating aspiring musicians for professional participation in society, based on an analysis of experiences among opera conservatory students, music theatre students in the folk high schools and their teachers in both systems. The research questions are: What possibilities are voice students offered to prepare themselves for societal participation during their education; and what are the main possible outcomes of these preparations?

Ambiguity as a way to understand maintaining vs. challenging traditions

To be able to understand the purpose of the opera and musical theatre students' education and how it is carried out, we use de Beauvoir's theory of ambiguity. Simone de Beauvoir (1948) states that human beings have an inherent freedom to choose as they please, although

they are often constrained or oppressed by societal norms and expectations. Freedom is, according to her, only achieved through being directed towards a specific goal within a project. To be able to succeed in striving for freedom, humans need to first acknowledge failure to validate their existence fully. This means that human beings have both responsibility and freedom to choose what to do and become in a specific situation, which must include acceptance of possible failures. de Beauvoir offers an account of intentionality which designates meaning-disclosing, meaning-making and meaning-desiring activities of consciousness as both insistent and ambiguous. They can be defined as insistent as they are spontaneous and unstoppable, and on the other hand ambiguous as they hinder any possibility of self-unification or closure. But, de Beauvoir further implies that the constraining or oppression starts early and continues through education, since people are raised with the belief that the world is as it is and can't be changed. According to de Beauvoir, the world can be hard to change since it is formed by choices made by humans that validate agreed upon structures, which create patterns hard to break out of. Even though humans make their own choices of what they want to become, the choices are always made in relation to what people have become already. Choices can be experienced as easy or hard to take, in relation to the social and economic conditions of the situation.

Rather than embracing freedom, humans constantly and naturally box themselves into something comfortable, and box in others to confirm the way they live their lives. To be able to live truly, though, people must act outside the "boxes" that are imposed upon them, otherwise they will not grow beyond the expected, and freedom will, according to de Beauvoir, remain unrealised. Based on such a way of thinking, the question is how higher music education relates to de Beauvoir's notion of freedom. Does it encourage students to go beyond, or stay in a specific "box"? To go beyond and outside boxes is according to the philosopher followed by ambiguity and moral dilemmas, as self-unification or closure is hindered. De Beauvoir underlines that ambiguity must be faced, even if it contributes to discomfort, which implies that students should be encouraged to handle ambiguity during their studies. According to her, to strive to be moral and to be free is one and the same decision. It is about reflecting upon and taking responsibility for the consequences of one's actions. Additionally, freedom includes an intersubjective level, since all humans are depending on each other to build a world where everyone are offered possibilities to strive toward freedom, and to be able to transcend constraining conditions.

In oppression of any kind, humans are directed to situations where they can only live in passive reproductive immanence. de Beauvoir underlines that humans should strive for freedom for all, since "the existence of others as a freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my own freedom" (p. 97). Relating back to the aim and research questions for the study, we apply de Beauvoir's theory of ambiguity to describe and analyze higher music education activities educating aspiring musicians for professional societal

participation. Specifically, we are partly focusing on the possibilities offered to music student in order to prepare for societal participation during their education, in relation to the boxes that are imposed to them, such as traditions, norms, and social patterns. Partly, we are interested in the main outcomes of these preparations, as for example if students choose to act in/outside boxes during their education, and which ambiguities or moral dilemmas that follow their choices. de Beauvoir's concept of freedom is used in the conclusion of the paper, to discuss individual as well as societal consequences of the findings.

Re-analysis of two materials in intertwinement

In this study material from two separate research projects are used and intertwined. The first focuses on opera education; the second on musical theatre education. The aim of the research was to shed light on the relationship between higher music education and society, including views of music students seen as aspiring professional musicians.

The opera conservatory context

The interviews with the opera students were performed within a larger project financed by the Baltic Sea Foundation that aimed to explore conservatory education's framing of belonging regarding nation and gender in Europe. The interviews were conducted in three prominent conservatories: Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, Franz Liszt Academy, and Sibelius Academy, Helsinki university of the arts.

The musical theatre program context

The students in the musical theatre program studied for three years in *Musikalakademien* at Strömbäcks folk high school in Umeå, Sweden. As a part of their education, they took part in the three-year project called *Sammankonst* run by the municipal arts organization *Kulturverket* in Umeå, Sweden. The project was financed by *Allmänna Arvsfonden* and followed by us using an ethnographic approach (Ferm Almqvist & Hentschel, 2023), aiming to explore and describe participation in aesthetic communication. Trailing research has been practised in Sweden for the last 15 years; it provides a way to come close to, interact with and create common understanding of practical fields on scientific grounds (Johannisson et al., 2008). In the project, the students co-created and performed in a professional musical theatre production with a group of intellectually disabled adults consisting of participants from *Fritid för alla*, an NGO that has previously collaborated with *Kulturverket* in several artistic projects.

Sammankonst was the first project where the group of students from *Musikalakademien* collaborated with the visitors of *Fritid för alla*. *Kulturverket's* approach to work collaboratively in/with/through aesthetic expressions are based on a view that focuses on creativity

as driven by desire and curiosity but still embraces mistakes through trial and error. The process or end result are not possible to foresee beforehand. *Kulturverket* sees creativity as something that is possible for all human beings to participate in, and their working method (“the relay model”) allows for creative collaboration to take place between different groups of participants (Ferm Almqvist & Hentschel, 2022). Since this study is focused on the experiences of students and teachers of HME (and not of the intellectually disabled participants in NGOs), we have chosen to not include the voices of the participants from *Fritid för alla* in the material. Their experiences are represented in research presented in earlier publications (Ferm Almqvist & Hentschel, 2022a, 2022b, 2023).

Performing the study

We conducted interviews and a qualitative survey with six conservatory students; fifteen musical theatre students; and two teachers working within musical theatre and opera education respectively. The interviews with the conservatory participants concentrated upon the students’ experiences before and during their studies as well as their vision regarding the future. In addition, the opera teacher’s experiences and visions concerning the meaning and quality of higher vocal education in relation to society was taken into account. Four of the interviews took place via the digital communication tool Zoom during fall 2021, and three interviews were performed at the participating institutions in Spring 2022, recorded by a voice recorder. The semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009) lasted for about 60–75 minutes and were transcribed verbatim by a company.

The material developed within the musical theatre setting consisted of a qualitative questionnaire (Eckerdal & Hagström, 2017) answered by the students in Autumn 2020, covering experiences among the participants the first introductory semester of the project. At the end of the project two group interviews were conducted with the students, where both individual and collective opinions were gathered (Frey & Fontana, 1991). The interviews concerned the students’ experiences during the project and lasted for 30 minutes each. In addition, one semi-structured interview (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009) that lasted for 20 minutes was conducted with the vocal teacher at the musical theatre program during Autumn 2022. The interview covered the teacher’s current and retrospective experiences regarding her and her student’s participation, having the project as a part of a three-years-long educational program. Information letters were sent out beforehand, and the participants were also orally informed about ethical considerations and data management plans; finally, informed consent was recorded. The interviewees knew that participation was confidential, and that they could choose to withdraw from the study, or withdraw parts of the interviews, at any time during the study without any reprisals.³

3 The projects follow the Swedish <https://www.vr.se/english/analysis/reports/our-reports/2017-08-31-good-research-practice.html> and European guidelines https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/fp/7/89888/ethics-for-researchers_en.pdf

Analysis

The transcribed interviews together with the qualitative answers of the survey were analyzed in a phenomenological manner (van Manen, 2016). Whilst the materials had different formats, we treated the written documents as a key to the participants' lived experience of educational programs with a specific focus on *educating aspiring musicians for professional societal participation*. The materials were analyzed following a phenomenological analysis model in four phases (Norberg & Lindseth, 2004), first separately and then gradually intertwined by the two researchers. In the first phase, a naive reading in line with a phenomenological process, the transcribed material from each case was analyzed by one researcher, and the material from the second case by the other. The open initial reading offered an opportunity to grasp the meaning as a whole and identify different aspects in the voice student and teachers' experiences of participating in higher music education. The reading led to a selection process where excerpts were chosen to be analysed in the next phase by the authors separately.

In the second phase, a thematic structural analysis, the researchers were seeking to identify and formulate themes. "A theme is a thread of meaning that penetrates text parts, either all or just a few" (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004, p. 149). The impetus was to convey essential definitions of lived experience, in the two materials separately. We individually related to the phenomenon *educating aspiring musicians for professional societal participation* to define which parts of the excerpts were related to the focus of investigation, and subsequently we chose to cut the parts of the excerpts that did not appear as parts of the phenomenon. The themes were reflected upon in relation to the naive understanding until the themes were validated through the structural analysis. In the end of this phase, the themes described how the participants in the two studies separately experienced cultivation towards the professional future.

In the third phase, aiming for a comprehensive understanding, the two researchers thoroughly read the two thematic materials in collaboration. The themes were summarized and reflected on in relation to the research question and the context of the study aiming to bring out the essence of the phenomenon in an approachable way, and to situate readers in the social contexts. The text was read again as a whole with the naive understanding and the validated themes in mind, and with an as open a mind as possible. The two sets of materials were intertwined and could by that mirror each-other and contribute to a full description of the phenomenon.

In the fourth phase that involved formulating of results in a phenomenological way, the authors shaped a text out of the themes that represents the common experience of the phenomenon, exemplified by anonymous individual students' and teachers' voices through chosen excerpts. The results were formulated in everyday language as close to lived experience as possible. It should be underlined that a phenomenological text can never be read merely for its direct message. Instead, the goal was that the reader should start to think and

relate the results to their own experiences and practices (van Manen, 2002). The impetus was to communicate the results in a sensitive, situated way (de Beauvoir, 1948), which in turn aims to offer the reader an opportunity to understand the participants' experiences from "within" (Ferm Almqvist & Hentschel, 2020). In the discussion the result that shows instances of education aspiring professional musicians was shed light on with the help of de Beauvoir's concepts of ambiguity and freedom.

Cultivating ambiguities within HME

The results show several situations where ambiguities and moral dilemmas are present in the stories of the participants in the study. The ambiguities were related to how they are prepared for societal participation, and to which outcomes these preparations result in. In the following section, we present the results thematically under the headings: *Taking responsibility for music in society*, *Developing professional identities* and *Challenging traditions*.

Taking responsibility for music in society

In the analysis we find that all involved agree upon that it is important to make works of opera performances and musicals available to a broad audience. What becomes clear is that the educational program that have decided to create and compose a work together with intellectual disabled young adults, have broadened their arguments for how and why music is important in society.

It becomes clear through the analysis of the interview material developed in the opera conservatory project, that the participants perceive music, in particular Western classical music (WCM) as important. One of the students defined music as "the basic of all" in society, and that it should be available to "all", especially to young people. However, there was a worry among the interviewees that arts are assuming a less important role in society and that conservatories have a larger responsibility to maintain and develop the role of culture in society:

And I think we're sort of one of the last castles to hold up the culture. Well, I think there are many projects in our Academy about bringing music to all the people and more into the society and available. (Teacher)

According to the students, the younger generation must be offered new views or expressions to avoid WCM becoming (or remaining) solely for the upper middle class. Such offers could be exemplified by the project run within the musical theatre program, their teacher expresses: "Our motto is to create diversity on stage, and work with artists who mirror our time." They emphasize that the musical theatre field needs expanding on their views of representation

on stage, and that by collaborating with *Fritid för alla* in *Sammankonst* on- and off-stage was a step in taking responsibility for change in that direction. One of the musical theatre students noticed that it is rare to see participants with intellectual disabilities *on stage* in musical theatre. They continued with emphasizing the difference between talking about the topic of diversity and actually being open to showing diversity in representation on stage. For this student, *Sammankonst* was a positive example of the latter. While the opera programs seem to focus on maintaining WMS traditions inside conservatories to secure its survival in society, the musical theatre program, seemed more focused on expanding the educational and professional arenas. This is indicated by collaborations outside the educational context, and actions towards a more contemporary diverse representation on stage.

Finally, the analysis shows that the opera students are situated within a tradition (WCM) described as diminishing in society, where the conservatory's responsibilities consist of offering possibilities for the students to be able to maintain and develop the tradition. In this example, we can define what de Beauvoir labels *the box* as the traditions and norms structuring the diminishing interest for WCM. In the above example, we find that the students express concern for the lack of adaptation in repertoire to attract a younger audience, as the repertoire that are to learn and perform is traditional opera parts, composed by "genius white men". This can be seen as a way of glancing outside the box, resulting in an ambiguous situation – the students worry (in contrast to the teachers) that the teachers are unaware of the problem and hence the task of engaging a younger and broader audience. The musical theatre students, who has been involved in creating and performing a musical in cooperation with intellectual disabled persons, agree with their teachers regarding how the traditions within the musical theatre stages need change in relation to contemporary representation. The project *Sammankonst* was a concrete example of how this could be done in practice.

Developing professional identities

Views on taking responsibility for music in society also relates to which professional identities the opera and musical educational contexts offer their students to cultivate. In the analysis we find aspects that relate to both musical/artistic and personal identities within and outside the educational context, infused with thoughts of what the future might hold for a professional musician in society.

In the case of the opera students, the program offers narrow possibilities regarding cultivating musical identities within WCM, although they acknowledge that there are very few opportunities to obtain a work position as a traditional WCM voice musician or singer.

As a singer you have three choices. If you're lucky, you're going to get to the opera choir, we have two of them. If you're lucky you're going to get into the philharmonic choir, we have one of them. If you're very, very, very lucky, you can do a role or even become a soloist in national opera, we have one. (Student)

It is seen as important among the participants that the opera students create professional musical identities by becoming as specialized as possible. To be broad or well-rounded, means, according to the analysis, that the students can perform concerts, lieder, and oratorios, as well as solo parts in opera. When it comes to how students are encouraged to use their singing in society, securing a role in an opera is the dominant goal. The big opera theatres are the most valued, but operetta and smaller houses are also mentioned.

I'm of course concentrating on opera, and operetta. I'm not applying for musicals ...
The more professional a place is, the stricter it is to have your voice type, and to roles that are connected to your voice type. (Student)

Besides the mentioned opportunities, opera and operetta, the opera students envision and experience a few other musical settings as possible for developing their future professional musical identities, mentioning singing popular music, or "light musical gigs", as well as chamber music. The repertoire they are to learn and perform though, is traditional opera parts composed by "genius white men".

Looking at the musical theatre program, previous final productions of former students, are known to the current musical theatre students and become a quality stamp for what they aim for in their cultivation of professional identities. These productions could be compared with an opera production. One student describes: "With knowledge of what the previous group [of students in the program] performed, we had certain expectations of what we would do for our final production". The students and their teacher describe how they are situated in a longstanding tradition of studying and interpreting pre-existing musical theatre, within both musical theatre education and professional musical theatre performance practice. In musical theatre, as in the opera singers are expected to interpret existing material for specific voices.

I also think that very much of what we learn, what we do daily is grounded in that we, we interpret more than ... it becomes interpretation for us who study to become musical theatre artists. That we, we are used to being handed material and embodying it in ourselves. (Student)

According to the teacher at the music theatre program, becoming a professional musical artist is characterized by cultivating both an "artistic" identity (singing, dancing, and acting skills), as well as a "personal" identity—where relational aspects are highly valued. This is explained by the teacher as being able to collaborate with all participants involved in a production by focusing on similarities within the production instead of differences, but at the same time acknowledging that these differences offer varied ways of participation in musical theatre productions. The teacher's view is that students engaging in society and meeting people with other living conditions than their own enables them to develop

a “good perspective on what is actually important in being a human and a musical theatre artist”. This can be seen as both a prerequisite for and a consequence of the collaboration with *Kulturverket*.

There are some examples in the research material that show thoughts of the students’ (possible) broader professional musical futures as singers in society after graduation, within both the opera and the musical theatre contexts. On the same track, the opera teacher talks about former students who have started their own companies where they also perform theater or musical improvisation. Although, acting or improvising are not trained or encouraged through their education, as, according to the students, engaging in activities where the voice is used in free ways during their training would result in the teachers losing the chance to control the development of their students’ voices. To create an opera in collaboration with groups in society, would not mean singing in totally new ways, but to broaden identities in other ways, as the *Sammankonst* example shows, but still demands challenging of established traditional ways of organizing education.

But organization of the education offers openings and hindrances for collaborations. According to the opera students, it is hard to find students to create projects with, as the program isn’t organized in a manner that makes the students from different departments meet within the WCM genre. One exception is the entrepreneurship/management course included in the educational programs. One student recalls that they created a project where they sang lyrics by female poets together with a pianist, performed at a literature and music evening. According to our interpretation, this seems to broaden the student’s visions of their future to some extent. But students also expressed downsides to participating in these kinds of entrepreneurial projects, as it is seen as time consuming among the students.

But it’s a hard job, you must really sell your every gig and get to send emails and make phone calls. And it’s kind of different work than this only artistic work. So not very many are ready to do that. (Student)

According to the opera program participants, it takes time to cultivate the voice, which could be viewed as one reason to why vocal performance appears to be the major way of participating in society. The analysis also shows that teaching is the most often mentioned example of possible societal work among opera students, even if it is clearly viewed as a side activity. Most of the interviewees are in that case referring to teaching of advanced students, which according to them, demands that they themselves are on a high artistic level before they start teaching. Doing research and working in opera houses with administration are also mentioned as possible professional futures after finishing the program by the students.

In addition to these examples of opera students’ possible futures as musicians in society, a clear connection between the content of the educational programs and the coming future in society is visible. In relation to the earlier presented view among the participants of how students must develop their musical identities with a narrow focus on opera roles

within WCM, we find that the opera students seem to be encouraged to consider alternative life choices other than working as musicians after graduation. The opera teacher states that they encourages students to have more than singing in their lives, since they finds it “dangerous to optimize their life by working as a singer”, mentioning having a family, a hobby or a summer cottage to renovate, or to work for charity as possible alternatives to working professionally as a musician in WCM. The analysis makes clear that it is important that teachers within higher music education take responsibility to offer views of possible working opportunities, and that the programs offer education towards the same.

The analysis shows that both opera and musical theatre students are offered possibilities to prepare for participation in society within their educational programs that relate to both musical/artistic and personal identities within and outside the educational context. The opera students are mainly offered possibilities to develop their musical identities with a narrow focus on opera roles. The entrepreneurial courses and small projects the students engage in seem to be time consuming. Even though the emphasis in the opera programs is highly concentrated on shaping a narrow, skilful opera musician, this is done with the insight that former graduates seem to actually work with what they are educated for. This is visible in the several mentions from both opera students and teacher of alternative career plans, exposing an ambiguity between which skills the students are encouraged to develop within the educational context, and shaping their professional identity as musicians in society. The musical theatre students are, in a similar way to the opera students, offered a quite narrow specialized education focusing on developing artistic/musical skills. But, as the program collaborates with *Kulturverket*, their education is also grounded in a view that includes developing a “personal” side to their professional identity, in where relations with other people outside the program are seen as vital.

Challenging traditions

The third and final theme that came out of the analysis shows how traditions within opera and musical theatre educational settings are challenged. As mentioned, the participants in the program that decided to cooperate with intellectually disabled young adults, and the program has broadened their views of what a voice educational program can be about and contribute to. It becomes clear that it is possible to challenge and change strong educational traditions and norms. This leads to questions regarding what to preserve and what to challenge and/or change within higher music education, in relation to a changing society. These will be elaborated further in our concluding thoughts.

By referring to the two formerly presented themes, our results establish that both programs are embedded in traditions where students are made to focus narrowly on musical skills specifically within their respective genre. A future as a professional musician participating in society seems only for the selected few. But through collaborative creation and performing of a musical show during their educational program, the musical theatre

educational tradition has been challenged. Through this experience, which in addition included adults with intellectual disabilities, students and teachers have developed their views on relations to the society outside the educational setting as important for the shaping of the students' professional identities. Considering this, we now present more specifically how the traditions have been challenged.

As previously mentioned by the opera students, they are concerned with encouraging younger audiences to experience opera works live. The opera students suggested presenting more experimental concerts using young singers. The analysis also shows that the students are open to try out popular concert formats such as matinee concerts, and concert programs that combine familiar and unknown repertoire, which could make it easier to listen and take part of the music:

But also giving concerts that are really easy to listen for the audience. That I think that we need them more to get younger people in. Every time I have had younger people in my concert, they have been really fascinated. But it's hard to get people there. (Student)

The opera students' thoughts above on how to challenge the traditions led us to consider potential strategies. One way to move forward might be to make students active in organizing the concerts. The voice teacher suggests that more credits should be made non-mandatory which should open up individual choices regarding repertoire; for example when it comes to genre, style, and epochs. Simultaneously, the students are focused on acquiring work in opera, but the roles for their specific vocal ranges complicates the possibilities of free choice. There are no other examples in the material which implies that the tradition of the opera programs is challenged. In the following section, we will illustrate and analyze how the project *Sammankonst* can be seen as a way of challenging traditions in the musical theatre program, which could also be applied in opera educational programs.

Initially *Kulturverket* presented *Sammankonst* to the musical theatre students as a co-created musical theatre project where the students would be engaged in the whole process of both creating and performing a professional musical theatre production. Several of the students described their hesitation at this point:

Will this be our final production? ... Will I gain from this as an artist? ... Will this production be at the same level as the previous final productions at the school? (students in interview)

The students' earlier experiences of previous productions collided with the new co-creative design and working methods of the project. In relation to the artistic skills needed to become a professional musical theatre artist, their teacher expressed that the project was very successful. They underlined that it is important that the students become aware of the

whole process from creation to performance of a musical theatre production, and of the roles that everyone involved in a production play:

From an artistic perspective, I mostly think that when you come out in the society as an artist, you need to know and understand a producer's role. You need to understand a scenographer's role. You need to understand a costume designer. You need to understand all the technology that surrounds you, and all the design it requires. (Teacher)

In an interview undertaken after the project had finished, the musical theatre students expressed similar thoughts of the outcomes. The creative process, where the students were expected to create music (as well as manuscript and characters) was at first a very challenging process and could be seen as an ambiguous situation. The task of creating music collided with the students' earlier experiences of solely reproducing and interpreting already created musical material. Most students were inexperienced in writing music and felt nervous about the task. When the project was finished, the students described a sense of relief and pride in the outcome. Hence, the analysis implies that to create an opera in collaboration as part of an opera educational program could broaden skills and possible identities among opera students as well. But we suggest that such inventions must be based on a will to challenge traditions, and a curiosity in the consequences of challenging those traditions.

The musical theatre teacher emphasized that the project enabled the students to meet and get to know the other participants not only as professionals, but as human beings. Since the students had never worked together with a group of people outside the institution before, and not least a group of intellectually disabled human beings, the project created a collision between the students' earlier experiences of working partners and the meeting with *Fritid för alla*.

To meet *Fritid för alla* has been to see past our differences and to see our similarities. To see our longing to create and our love for the stage. To be in a situation where our similarities are in focus, not our differences. And I think that does something to the soul, and to how you want to be. (Teacher)

The musical theatre students also described the (unexpected) insights in how both the students and *Fritid för alla*—differences aside—shared very similar dreams, feelings, hopes and goals for their lives and their participation in the project. This was, according to the teacher, relevant when viewing the program as preparation for joining society as a professional musician. They emphasized the importance of the students acknowledging that the musical theatre business is greatly lacking in varied representation, and that this situation needs to change. The program aimed to collaborate with artists reflecting contemporary society—including for example persons with intellectual disabilities—who traditionally aren't included in professional musical theatre productions. This acknowledgement, and

the strive for change towards equality were made possible through the project. The participating in *Sammankonst* enabled the students to challenge traditions in musical theatre productions, both when it comes to musical skills and relations, which resulted in positive experiences. In the words of one student:

It feels like this creative process, it was a preparation for the community that awaits us outside the school. So, even if we would have wanted that security of reproducing something already existing, I think we learned more by doing something with new conditions. You understand in a way, that this is how you build a production. And it can be built by anyone, you just do it. Anyone can build a musical from the ground up. (Student)

As the interview with the teacher came to an end, they expressed the strive towards adding something important—a wish for other institutions in HME to take on similar challenges. When asked for their reasoning, they said that “we need a stage in Sweden that actually reflects a contemporary community.” In summary, the results show how both the opera programs and the musical theatre program see their role in preparing aspiring musicians for professional participation in society as important; with specific focus on building relations with the outside society and shaping students’ professional identities as musicians.

The opera students seem to find themselves in an ambiguous situation of trying to balance in between acknowledging facing a quite insecure working future because of a perceived decreasing interest in opera, and to “turn the trend”, wanting to challenge the traditions that constitute the genre and educational norms. The music theatre students on the other hand, although within a similar tradition, was put in a challenging situation through the project *Sammankonst*, where the educational setting allowed them to experience a change of tradition. This raises questions of *who* should be responsible for enabling challenge and change of traditions within higher music educational contexts, and as previously asked, what to preserve and what to challenge and/or change. Seen through de Beauvoir’s theory of ambiguity, it becomes relevant to elaborate upon the results in relation to presets for students’ experiences of freedom in the process of becoming professional musicians in a changing society. Who in HME is responsible for creating an environment that attend to and act on students’ ambiguous and sometimes discomfoting experiences regarding how traditions and the changing society collides? How can it be done?

Conclusions and further thoughts

Based on a phenomenological approach where humans and things in the world are seen as intertwined and inseparable, the aim of the study presented in this article was to describe higher music education activities in educating aspiring musicians for professional

participation in society. In order to epistemologically access the phenomenon under study, education for professional participation in society, we gathered verbal and written accounts of experiences of (so and so). These were then analysed by using a phenomenological method. We focused on which possibilities the students were offered to prepare for societal participation during their education, as well as the main outcomes of these preparations. Both opera students and musical theatre students acknowledge that there is a need to adapt to a more open, inclusive view of who will become future performers and audiences.

We found that while the educational settings present themselves quite similarly with a focus on developing professional musical/artistic skills, the opera students aren't offered the scope to challenge the traditions within their education. As the musical theatre program decided to cooperate with *Kulturverket* through the three-year program, they offered the students the possibility to challenge musical theatre traditions as a part of their education. Consequently, we can say that the musical theatre program was organized in line with earlier research that states the need for HME to adapt to the changing society in relation to inclusion and building relationships with and within society (Hess, 2015; Minors et al., 2017; Schippers, 2010; Westerlund & Gaunt, 2021).

Based on de Beauvoir's philosophy, it becomes relevant to ask: (how) can higher music education create spaces for cultivating of ambiguity that provides students with a sense of freedom of possibilities in becoming a professional musician participating in society? As presented in the results, the musical theatre students were initially directed towards a specific goal (to study at the three-year program and perform a final production), which also included taking part in the project *Sammankonst*. At first, the project's design collided with the students' expectations and past experiences, creating hesitation as the students worried about failing. After *Sammankonst* was finished, the students acknowledged that the project had led to several positive insights and skills that probably hadn't been developed if they had taken part in the program in a more traditional way. Hence, the contributions to societal change expressed by students in Coutts and Hill's (2022) study were exemplified. They collaborated with several artists, they had clear messages to the audience, they used social media, and the theatre constituted an event that related to a social issue. They got the possibility to practise activism during (and through) their education.

Without *Sammankonst* as part of the educational program, the outcomes would probably have provided great knowledge of how to reproduce traditional musical theatre traditions, similar to the outcomes of opera programs, but in another genre. The project can be seen as an attempt to break the recycling wheel that Blix et al. (2019) mention, or even to redirect it. Or to speak with de Beauvoir: *Sammankonst* could be seen as a positive example of how to stop contributing to the reinforcement of a community that builds on passive immanence as a norm. Throughout the collaborative project the students were given space and time to let old and new experiences collide and let ambiguous feelings about their situations emerge, which is stated as crucial when it comes to participation in aesthetic

activities (Ferm Almqvist & Hentschel, 2022a; von Germeten 2022). For example, being forced to compose music and write text, put the musical theatre students in insecure situations where they had to make choices without knowing the consequences. The students gradually accepted the feelings and transcended their situation, which in turn led to awareness about what musical theatre in the community *is* and *could be*, as well as who normally *is* or *isn't* allowed on the musical theater stage. These kinds of insights, if taken seriously within higher music education, could lead to change of traditions and representation in the society, also when it comes to opera education. In line with what earlier research uncovered and requested, it seems important that higher music education is organized in a way that encourages students to meet and work with students from other departments within conservatories. In addition, it seems crucial that they are encouraged to collaboratively compose and perform their own pieces, as they did in the musical theatre project, and cooperate with groups and organizations outside the conservatory. In turn, such a way of organizing an educational program demands, and offers, teachers to let go of their control regarding the students' voices and instead explore how musicians could be educated within music education, for professional participation in a changing society.

The example of the collaborative project that included creating a musical theatre show, addresses the question that Hess (2015) asks of higher music education. She points out the importance of preparing aspiring musicians exhaustively for a dynamic and changing society. In addition, she underlines that this has to be done in an inclusive way, where relationships with and within society are created and maintained. The study has shown how material from two different research projects can be combined and thus contribute to an understanding of needed developments in teaching and learning in HME. The specific developments regard consequences of professional educational programs in relation to societal work (Gaunt et al., 2021). Finally, we hope that the findings can challenge HME's existing conservation of societal classes that Bull (2019) points out, and contribute to possible ways forward beyond the challenges Gaunt et al. (2021) stress concerning lack of societal awareness, social engagement, and lifelong employability dimensions in musician education. If so, it becomes possible to imagine how vocal students can become singers, libretto writers and composers who participate in meaningful and conscious ways in society.

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