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Abstract

Women composers are an under-studied population within the creative workforce. This study reports on 225 surveys with women composers internationally. Using a human capital lens, we aim to shed more light on the nature of women composers' careers and their career trajectories, focusing more specifically on the way they work, how they enter the industry, how they build a reputation, and how they support and sustain their careers. The survey consisted of mostly open-ended questions alongside selected closed questions; data were analyzed using content analysis. Findings highlight the composers' relationships with performers, the importance of networks and social capital, the role of social media and online presence, family support and external funding, and the prevalence of multiple roles due to changing career aspirations. Implications of these findings indicate a need to better prepare women for a career in music composition, the need for more grant and funding options, the

need for composers to effectively use the online space to enhance visibility and find support and the need for a collaborative effort to reduce gender inequity in the industry.

Keywords: women composers, careers, human capital, networking

Introduction

Since the 1970s, women composers have been the subject of intense inquiry (McClary, 1993) by feminist musicologists. These scholars have begun to expose the issues that confront women composers (McClary, 1993; Cusick, 1999; Macarthur 2010), including the difficulty in becoming recognized, being commissioned and being performed by professional musicians (Fowler, 2006; Hirsch, 2008; Macarthur, 2010; 2014; Browning, 2016; Shapiro, 2016).

The present study draws on mainly qualitative and some quantitative data derived from the survey responses of 225 women composers internationally. The study makes three contributions to the existing body of knowledge on the careers and career trajectories of women composers. Firstly, the study enhances understanding of this under-studied population by examining how the women work, how they enter the industry, how they become known, and how they support their practice. Secondly, the study creates a deeper understanding of the ways in which women composers manage their careers. Thirdly, using a human capital lens we illustrate the need for women composers to develop economic, cultural and social capital in order to enter the composition field as well as sustain and support their practice over time. The final aspect is the focus of this paper.

Human capital

Drawing on human capital theory (Becker, 1964), every individual has their own capital which they can use to start and develop their career. The theory posits that organizations

distribute rewards to their members according to their human capital: everything they bring to an organization. This view implicitly assumes that individuals compete for the rewards available in organizations, and that some are more successful than others (Brown and Hesketh, 2004).

Most research linking human capital to individual or organizational outcomes has focused on knowledge, skill, experience and/or education (Ployhart and Moliterno, 2011). While many researchers believe that education is the most important component of human capital (McArdle *et al.*, 2007), evidence suggests that the relationship between educational achievement and career success is limited (Ng and Feldman, 2010). Social capital reflects the interpersonal aspects of human capital, such as “knowing-whom” competencies concerned with formal and informal professional networks (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994). Empirical work such as that conducted across multiple occupations by Seibert *et al.* (2001) has demonstrated that interpersonal connections (who one knows) are crucial to career success as they enhance workers’ access to career-related information and resources (Bozionelos, 2015). This can be achieved through networking (Kim, 2013), including networking specific to the arts sector (Richardson *et al.*, 2017).

People possess different types of capital. The study reported here adopted human capital theory as it facilitates examination of individuals’ career capitals including motivation, skills and competencies (Inkson and Arthur, 2001). As such, we anticipated that it would help us to examine the extent to which individuals in precarious occupations such as composition need economic, social and cultural capital in order to enter, support and sustain their careers. Three considerations informed our thinking. First, workers are known to need the financial resources—economic capital—to support themselves during early career whilst income-levels are low and multiple entry attempts are made (Bennett and Bridgstock, 2015; McLeod *et al.*, 2009). Next, and given the networked nature of work in the creative industries (Thanki and

Jeffreys, 2007), social capital in the form of individual and institutionalized relationships and networks is thought to provide an advantage to workers seeking work and other engagement opportunities (Smith and McKinlay, 2009; Wreyford, 2015). Finally, the importance of cultural capital that refers to a bundle of accumulated knowledge and other assets that confer privileges, status and opportunity (Bourdieu, 1985) is emphasized in the creative industries by the contingent nature of creative labor and strongly networked methods of obtaining work (Caldwell and Woodside, 2003).

Literature review

Despite a growing body of literature surrounding the creative industries in general, certain sub-sectors or groups of creative workers are still under-represented. Composers, and especially women composers, are among these; we know little about how they navigate their careers, how they enter the creative sector, how they build reputation, and how they support and sustain their careers.

The creative industries are highly competitive (Eikhof, 2014) and many aspects are gendered, as evidenced in the power differentials that tend to allow men to occupy powerful positions and male-dominated networks (Hennekam and Bennett, 2017a). Previous studies have emphasized the importance of networks in overcoming these constraints (Thanki and Jeffreys, 2007; Wittel, 2001). This is especially true in the early career stage, when knowing the “right” people helps individuals to establish themselves (Bennett, 2008; Luonila and Johansson, 2016). Creative industries networks are complex (Martin, 2007). They are also often difficult to access and they are known to exclude groups of individuals such as women (Smith and McKinlay, 2009; Wreyford, 2015). One important tool for networking is social media, which enables the development of reputation and visibility and has been linked to improved sales in music (Chen *et al.*, 2015). Despite its importance, however, Hanna et al.

(2011) argue that few artists understand how to use social media effectively. This is despite the time-consuming and competitive nature of external funding, which necessitates a variety of funding options including online crowdfunding (Bœuf *et al.*, 2014).

Multiple job-holding in the creative industries can be understood as a combination of project-based work, an oversupply of talent, and avoiding the necessity to “please” the market because of a reliance on sales (Bennett and Bridgstock, 2015; Eikhof 2014; Hennekam and Bennett, 2016a). Within this environment, many creative workers self-manage their careers and their professional development (von Rimscha and Siegert 2011) with little institutional support. The support of partners or family (Galloway *et al.*, 2002) can for many creative workers be a crucial aspect of creating a viable practice.

Many sub-sectors of the creative industries, including composition, can be particularly hostile to women (Banks and Milestone, 2011). In the embodied performative arts, work is irregular and concentrated on weekends and during evenings (Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013; Gill, 2002). Moreover, it requires frequent travel (Randle *et al.*, 2007). Parents and caregivers find it difficult to reconcile these factors with care commitments (Banks and Milestone, 2011; Gill, 2002), especially in embodied arts such as dance where one uses one’s body to perform and the artist is required to be present (Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013).

A further consideration is that of industry culture (Hennekam and Bennett, 2017a). In this regard, there is evidence that women in the creative industries may encounter sexism (Jones and Pringle, 2015; the Guardian, 2018), that they might not be taken as seriously as men (Bank and Milestone, 2011), and that they can be hindered by gendered stereotypes (Proctor-Thomson, 2013). As most individuals with decision-making power in the creative industries are men (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008), and men prefer to work with other men (Broadbridge and Hearn, 2008), work is largely reliant on gendered networks and attrition is more likely among female workers.

Finally, women's career aspirations are impacted by organizational culture as well as normative and structural constraints. Examples of this include the importance of informal networks, prevalence of project-based work, fluctuating income levels and the need to be geographically mobile and available after regular working hours to attend socializing events that are key in getting to know important decision-makers (Hennekam & Bennett, 2017b; McRae, 2003). Gendered expectations have been found to particularly influence young women's career aspirations (Creamer and Laughlin, 2005) in that women tend to focus on both career and the home (Curry *et al.*, 1994).

Methodology

The aim of this study was to both shed more light on the careers and career trajectories of women composers and to understand how they manage their work and careers. Our research questions were as follows.

1. *How do women composers enter the industry and become established?*
2. *How do women composers work?*
3. *How do women composers gain reputation and become known?*
4. *How do women composers support and sustain their practice?*

Sample

This is the third paper to emerge from an international study of women composers undertaken in 2015 and 2016. The study involved 225 women composers mostly from Australia, North America and Europe (see Table 1). The respondents had practiced as a composer for an average of 20 years and they had worked in music for between less than a year and 70 years. The women worked in a variety of musical genres including electronic, orchestral and film

music; 72% worked 30 or more hours per week. 94% of the composers had an educational background in music and 76% had completed tertiary (post-secondary) music education.

PUT TABLE 1 HERE

Procedures

Respondents were recruited through educational institutions, social media, professional associations and personal contacts. This was essentially a convenience sample; however, the research team used snowball sampling to recruit other women composers and to identify organizations that might be interested. Multiple initial points of contact were used to reduce bias. This was an unknown population and so response rate could not be calculated.

Ethical approvals were obtained prior to commencement. The survey was implemented in three parts, which were posted online at an interval of around two months; a total of 225 valid responses was received for one or more parts. Participants' anonymity was guaranteed.

The survey consisted almost exclusively of open questions. The few closed questions were analysed using Excel, while the qualitative data were analysed according to the principles of content analysis (Stemler, 2001). Content analysis was employed as we were interested in the lived experiences or perceptions of the women composers and also in the prevalence of themes. Moreover, content analysis is useful for both qualitative and quantitative data and allowed for a mix of deductive and inductive coding as appropriate for our methodology. Frequency counting was employed to identify recurrent patterns in the data (Wilkinson, 2011); the researchers were mindful of synonyms and the fact that words can have multiple meanings (Weber, 1990). Two researchers independently coded the data in order to reduce error and bias (Mays and Pope, 2000). The coding was then compared and

refined until agreement was reached. Inter-rater reliability was calculated and met the commonly used cut-off point of .80 (Cohen, 1960; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Instrument

The survey instrument was hosted on the online survey platform Survey Monkey. The instrument addressed five broad themes: education and training; career trajectories; the impact of gender on career; how work is obtained or created; and the role of collaboration. Repeated items enabled triangulation and contributed to validity and reliability. The English survey was translated into Dutch for use in the Netherlands by the use of back-and-forth translation. This work was undertaken by two native English-Dutch speakers.

Results and Discussion

The results and discussion section is organized in line with our four research questions: *How do women composers enter the industry and become established? How do women composers work? How do women composers gain reputation and become known? How do women composers support and sustain their practice?* The respondent voice is brought out using quotations which serve to highlight the main themes emerging from the data.

How do women composers enter the industry and become established?

The respondents emphasized the importance of networks and connections, linking these to a person's social capital.

Usually it's through a recommendation from someone who knows someone who knows someone else. (Respondent 4)

I have found the process of applying for festivals pretty hard to work out. My feeling is that such things are never a level playing field. (Respondent 22)

This finding aligns with earlier studies on other sub-sectors of the creative industries (see, for example, Manning and Sydow's (2007) research in the television industry and Thanki and Jeffreys' work in media (2007). The findings also reveal that economic, social and cultural capital influence the career success of women composers, confirming McLeod and colleagues' (2009) assertion that people with one type of capital such as economic capital are more likely to also possess other types of capital such as social capital in the form of professional networks.

Respondents were aware of the highly competitive nature of creative industries work before they entered their careers, and they expressed determination, resilience and a willingness to embrace multiple opportunities.

It was what I always wanted to do. (Respondent 60)

Music has always been a primary focus, since a child, so there was never a decision to go into it; it was a natural progression. (Respondent 51)

Echoing previous research (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2006), they endured because of what some composers described as a calling to work in music. Despite this, low levels of confidence emerged as an internal barrier in several cases. This is an aspect deserving of further study as low confidence has previously been identified as a gendered phenomenon (Henry, 2009; Kirkwood, 2009).

Some respondents highlighted that work is especially difficult in the early career stages and that both age and gender could also be a disadvantage, echoing previous research with female managers in Finland and Scotland (Jyrkinen and McKie, 2012).

A very mixed picture, but in the early days it was especially hard. I twice sent orchestral works to large symposia, using just my first initial and last name. In both cases it was assumed I was a male composer, and I was not received with particular kindness or approval in either case when I showed up for the performances (respondent 11).

For me it seems like it's luck ... opportunities are there for some ... especially males in my experience. Right place, right time? Not everyone gets a chance. (Respondent 55)

Finally, the composers reported how they had struggled with nerves and the competitive environment.

Any situations where I had to be compared to some norm were invariably unsuccessful. I realised that competing was never going to be a good strategy, opportunities have to grow from both sides. (Respondent 16)

Of interest, 20% of respondents bemoaned that they had not been prepared to effectively seek composition work. Moreover, hiring practices were often described as opaque and inconsistent.

I feel that the process by which someone gains the recognition by others that they are a composer (or whatever) is mysterious and somehow organic, and it is not something that we can entirely choose. (Respondent 22)

In sum, the networked and competitive nature of the industry, coupled with a lack of social capital and low levels of self-confidence hindered women composers to enter the industry and establish themselves.

How do women composers work?

The findings highlight the importance of composers' relationships with performers as they navigate their careers. This is an aspect addressed by few studies, perhaps due to a stereotype that compositional practice is a solitary activity. However, as Italian composer Luciano Berio explains, "music is not a solitary act. It ... is an incredibly complex process, including conceiving, writing, studying, organizing, listening. The fabric of music has its roots everywhere." (in Muller, 1997, p. 18).

Respondents reported that the relationship with performers was very important. Almost half (43%) of respondents composed for their own ensembles once or twice a year, and commissions were largely the result of reputation or recommendations. The confidence to approach musicians or ensembles not known personally to the composer often came later in career.

When I started composing, it was a drive that made me want to write even if there wasn't anybody to perform. People would hear my music and ask if they could play it. Then as time went on, my reputation spread and I was asked to write. (Respondent 77)

In line with Berio's comments, the findings suggest that performers are not simply recipients and performers of a score; rather, they are active agents with whom composers enjoy a symbiotic relationship and where mutual trust, understanding, effective communication and regular feedback are crucial. The relationship with performers was often positioned as a mutual exchange and participatory process. The characteristics of the relationships between performers and composers merits further research.

Symbiotic. At its best, composer and performer inspire each other and develop life-long commitments to each other's work. (Respondent 32)

[You] need ensemble leaders and performers to champion your work, so this relationship is very important ... also to give real feedback on the playability of the music, as many people easily find my music too hard because it's unusual, and as I don't play those instruments I need feedback on what is really wrong and what is possible. (Respondent 27)

The importance of this relationship was constant across musical genres, but it was impacted by personality and collaborative style.

I think the relationship between composer and performer changes, not so much with composer type, but according to how the composer works. [It] doesn't seem to me that genre has much to do with it. (Respondent 29)

How do women composers gain reputation and become known?

The women composers were asked to describe the processes they used to build their reputation and to become known. Although connections and networking continued to be cited frequently, other important factors emerged. These included online presence and social media, attracting the interest of performers and audiences, creating quality music and music recordings, being proactive, and ensuring that their compositions could be accessed.

Compose a lot: grow the catalogue. Choose great musical allies and bond with them in mutual support. Follow up on all connections and leads promptly; grow your community. (Respondent 40)

Remove barriers to access: make sure sheet music and recordings are easy to get hold of. Move in lots of social circles, not just one made of many composers competing with one another and talk about your work but also about others' work; only recommend your own stuff if it meets a need. (Respondent 7)

Although respondents emphasized the importance of an online presence and an active social media profile, very few of them reported using online tools to build their practice. In line with previous research (Hanna *et al.*, 2011) regardless of age, the composers did not know how to use online tools to their advantage. Only 61% of composers, for example, had their own websites and used them regularly to promote their work. Instead, the composers' networking and marketing strategies centered on social opportunities at events such as new music concerts, festivals and conferences, together with peers and professional associations. The most important use of online interactions was engagement in online communities of practice. Communities of practice can be defined as groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly

(Wenger, 2010). This helps participants to create a networks based on similar interests and thus further their careers. As such, online networks emerged as useful for circumventing the closed and male-dominated networks typical within the creative industries (Oakley and O'Brien, 2016).

To summarize, an online presence and social media were found to be important in gaining reputation and becoming known and especially online communities of practice might be a useful tool for women composers.

How do women composers support and sustain their practice?

Supporting their composition practice was an ongoing challenge for most of the women composers, who generated little income from their composition work. The women composers were like other creative workers in that they often had to juggle multiple jobs (Cunningham and Higgs, 2010) inside and beyond the creative industries (Hennekam, 2017; Hennekam and Bennett, 2016a). Only 35% of respondents described themselves full-time composers. Given the project-based nature of work and the associated irregular incomes, it was not surprising that many composers reported multiple roles: an average of 2.6 roles at the time of the survey, including roles both within and outside the arts. The most common activities were teaching and lecturing (mentioned by 46% of the respondents), and to a lesser extent running a school band or choir, church work, and administration. Many respondents highlighted a close relationship between their composition and other roles, which they positioned as mutually supportive.

Composing is a frustrating and lonely activity to do on a constant basis. When I tutor English, go to cultural events, etc., the socialization and outside influences inspire me with more energy to continue composing. (Respondent 67)

On average, the composers had derived an income from composition for 12.8 years. This was inconsistent, however, as 45 of the 225 respondents had not generated any income from their composition work during the past twelve months.

External funding in the form of grants was another way in which composers supported their careers. The respondents had enjoyed varying degrees of success in securing funding and they emphasized the importance of networking when securing funds. Once again, human and social capital played a significant role in this success. The finding accords with Richardson *et al's* (2017) report that social capital in the form of networks is important in sustaining a career in the arts.

In line with human capital theory, the findings highlight that career success is influenced by a nuanced interplay between different forms of capital and that this interplay is present and fluid across the career lifespan. For some respondents, this was expressed as frustration with networks that were seen to be more important than skills and hard work.

I applied to be the gallery coordinator at the [name] Art Gallery because I was a member and knew the outgoing gallery coordinator. We had previously worked together on organizing a group exhibition and she vouched for me at the gallery board meeting (respondent 1).

Unpaid composition work was prevalent, and although multiple roles were crucial to career sustainability the composers also stressed the financial, emotional, intellectual and practical support of friends and family.

My partner has helped me to acquire instruments and gear. She listens to work and has been always able to share from her own knowledge of literature and culture.

(Respondent 22: financial and intellectual support)

I don't have support from a husband or other family member - but I do have some encouragement from several close friends. (Respondent 17: emotional support)

Sometimes my partner helps me with my website, proofreading and making music videos. (Respondent 42: practical support)

Some composers shared that a lack of support had led them to cease composition altogether.

I had a husband who actively tried to prevent me from succeeding in my career and also found it very hard to obtain performances and commissions despite winning some notable prizes as a young composer. I became despairing and stopped composing.

(Respondent 12)

The respondents reflected that different life stages led to a shift in their priorities. The first of these was starting a family, which increased the need for a stable income. Becoming a parent led people to want to travel less, and look for more flexibility in their work. For some respondents, these aims were achieved by altering the roles within their portfolio, or by becoming self-employed.

I have three children and I have always put them first, so my other careers have had to fit around them. They are grown up now. (Respondent 2)

Health issues also led to changes in career aspirations.

I think that the burn-out factor (of needing to be available close to 24/7 and not being paid anywhere close to minimum wage) might be possible in your 20s and early to mid 30s, but I now have fairly serious health issues that have hijacked the past six years of my life, which I think have been significantly contributed to because of stress (long hours, not enough income and so not knowing how to pay the bills). (Respondent 17)

In some instances, a shift away from composition was perceived as temporary. These reports highlighted a love of composition that was deeply felt, and characterized by the hope that composition would re-emerge when circumstances allowed.

It's been more like a steady increase in music work and ideas. Recently I have had a major re-arrange of my life and priorities and music is now my main focus. (Respondent 2).

In subtle ways, many times [I have had to step back from composition], but I think the overall goal of making a living from music in some form or another is always at the top of my list, and the bottom of my heart. (Respondent 24)

In sum, supporting and sustaining their practice was challenging for women composers and they often held multiple jobs and did some unpaid work. Their career aspirations seemed to shift over time and were related to family commitments and health issues. However, a strong on-going passion for their practice emerged from the findings.

Implications for management

The findings have some important practical implications. The answers given by respondents highlight the importance of social capital in the careers of women composers and emphasize the importance of economic and cultural capital. This permeated many aspects of the composers' lives, from establishing themselves in early career to working with performers, becoming known, and supporting their practice through grants and funding.

Twenty percent of respondents reported that they were not adequately prepared to create a career in composition. As a result, they tried multiple strategies to become noticed, build a reputation, attract commissions and create a network. This finding suggests that educational institutions may not adequately prepare composition students for the entrepreneurial, business and marketing-related aspects of the profession. The finding aligns with previous studies, including those which included multiple creative workers and did not focus specifically on women (see, for example Hennekam and Bennett, 2016b).

Returning to the financial difficulties relating to low composition income and the difficulties of securing external funding, the findings imply that more grants and other types of funding are needed if women composers are to sustain their careers. Bœuf and colleagues (2014) mention crowdfunding as a viable option for funding and it is possible that such types of funding will become increasingly important in the lives of creative workers including women composers. Like traditional means of funding, however, these funding strategies require a level of social capital that the women composers did not feel they had. The finding highlights the need for collective action and awareness to make male-dominated networks more accessible to women composers, thereby enhancing their social capital and funding opportunities.

Online tools such as social media are increasingly used by creative workers to create more visibility for their work. Through online communities of practice, composers might create networks in order to obtain work or with a view to exchanging experiences and prompting peer support. This implies that ways of getting known and getting work are changing with the increasing importance of the online space. The way in which the online environment can help women composers in building and sustaining their careers merits further attention.

Finally, the findings point to the need for strategies to reduce gender inequities. This might include positive discrimination in the form of funding, programming and commissions. Such initiatives could work to benefit women composers in the form of social capital, enabling them easier access to networks they have been traditionally denied and helping to increase economic and cultural capital.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

The study has some limitations that need to be acknowledged. While the survey consisted of mainly open-ended questions and therefore obtained in-depth qualitative data, more semi-structured interviews or focus groups would strengthen the results and will form the basis of our research into the future.

We also note that respondents came from a wide range of countries, although Australia was clearly over-represented. We do not know how national culture, including governmental policies, subsidies and educational systems might influence the experiences of women composers. Future research might investigate these differences and similarities, including with composers from less researched geographic regions.

Finally, while human capital theory provided an interesting lens through which to examine the way women composers navigate their careers, other theoretical perspectives

would enhance this understanding. Future researchers might consider the use of social learning theory to further explore the socialization process (Bandura, 1977) and the use of social exchange theory (Blau, 2017) to study composers' relationships with performers.

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Table 1: Survey sample by geographical area (% rounded to one decimal place)

Location	Respondents (count)	Respondents (%)
Oceania	62	27.6
Europe	52	23.0
North America	75	32.8
Africa, Asia and South America	6	2.7
Not specified	31	13.8
Total	225	99.9