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How musicians differ?

Employment status, careers and recruitment in the living arts sector in Belgium

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Introduction

Arts disciplines are usually considered separately by academics. Today we are among people interested in music – and, more precisely, in “popular” music. Similar congress/seminar/research networks focus on dance, theater and so on. One cannot help but wonder: where does this kind of social division within academic work come from? Maybe because we all are music lovers, we tend to over-estimate the coherence of the musical art-world. Nevertheless, if we bear in mind that art is a form of work (Becker 1982; Faulkner 1971; Frith 2017; Menger 2001) and we pay attention to the “ordinary workers” of this professional space (Perrenoud and Bois 2017), we will notice that they often cross the borders of academics specialties. These ordinary workers are those who are located at the bottom or the middle of the professional hierarchy, who are not “stars” but nevertheless make a living – or trying to – with artistic skills, by performing/creating but also by teaching, by managing themselves and others, by being employed as roadie, etc (Perrenoud 2007).... Our starting point is that ordinary workers of the musical field – as ordinary workers of the theatrical field or the dance field – often need to diversify their activities to get enough money to make a living with their activities (Bureau, Perrenoud, and Shapiro 2009).

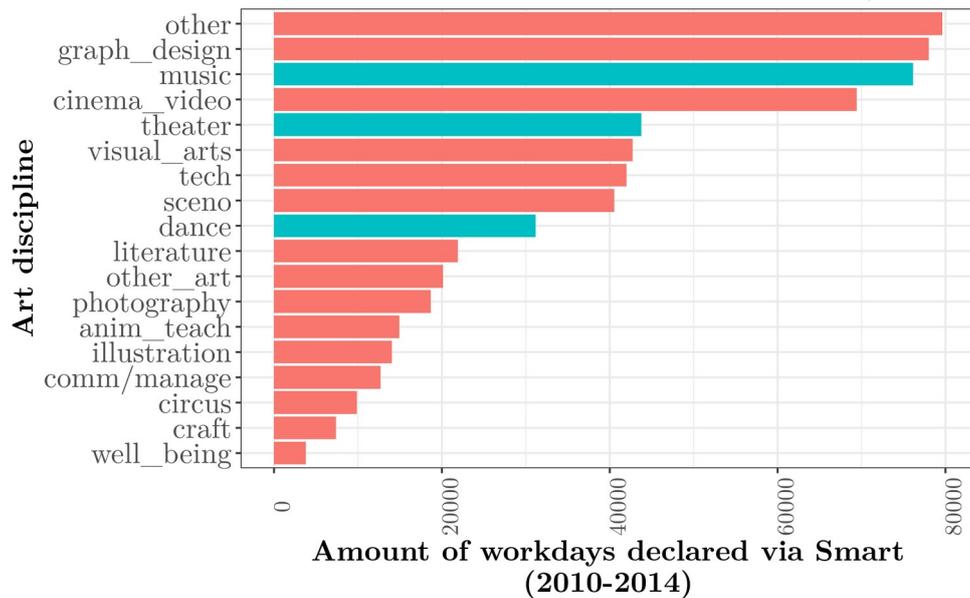
Starting there, one of the main questions that we aim to address is: how do they diversify their activities? More precisely, what are the material and administrative constraints that frame professional strategies of these ordinary art workers? Our hypothesis is that, among other factors, national employment schemes strongly contribute to shape their activities and strategies.

That is why, after conducting researches on musicians exclusively (Bataille and Perrenoud 2021; Perrenoud and Bataille 2017), we decided to broaden our gaze to the worlds of art and not limit our research to a specific aesthetic or discipline. During this presentation, we will share some key findings resulting from the comparison of three main segments of performing arts activity (theater, music and dance): what they share as performing art sector, what makes them different, what are the bridges between them ?

Data

To illustrate this, we will present you the first results of a research program that we run in Belgium thanks to the National Scientific Fund on the working conditions in the performing arts sector.

Our research combined both a quantitative and qualitative approach. On the qualitative side, the study is based on a two-and-a-half year ethnography with a theater company named Foxes and biographical interview campaign.

Fig. 1. Work declaration at Smart (2010-2)

On the quantitative side, we worked with a large dataset with information on work declarations of members of the Smart cooperative (N= 34585), which is the leading firm of PayRoll Company (or umbrella company) among artistic workers in Belgium since 2000. We decided to focus more on the work declarations of members between 2010 and 2014, because these years were the ones where we get the best information on members' activities. As you can see in Figure 1, we have information on workers in several sectors of the art world (music, theater, visual arts, dance, photography, literature, illustration, circus). People who had at least one work declaration in those artistic activities are our core population. We also have information on their declaration in related sectors – like sound/light/video engineering, management – and in others non-arts fields such as teaching, well-being (yoga) or graphic design. In this presentation, we will focus on those who get at least one declaration in music, theater or dance sectors.

These data allow us to present how work is organised in the performing arts and their implications in objective and subjective terms: how the different art worlds function in terms of employment conditions, income, perceptions of the work, etc.

A Brief Reminder on the Belgian Context

As we have pointed out, for us, employment conditions are at the heart of ordinary workers' professional strategies and views in the art sector. It is therefore necessary to provide some information on the Belgian context. Belgium is characterized by the small size of its country, which is almost 30 600 square km where Canada is almost 10 000 000 km². Getting from point A to the furthest point B in Belgium is like going from Detroit to Hamilton for those who know the London Canada area (around 300 km). It comprises three sociolinguistic areas: Flemish, French and German-speaking Belgium. There is a federal (national) government and different governments and policies for each of these sociolinguistic areas. Cultural policies, including grants to support creation, are different from one area to another. However, work and employment policies are managed by the federal state. In Belgium, there is a system of intermittent protection that allows workers considered as 'artists' to access to unemployment benefit income during periods of intermittency, without

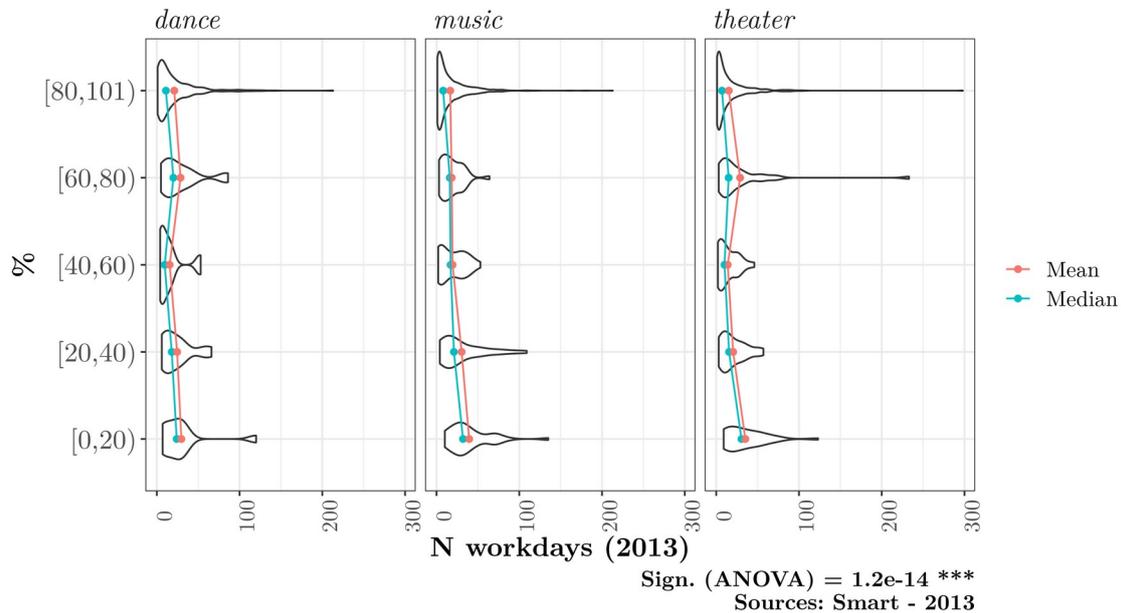
the amount of these unemployment benefits decreasing over time (this degressivity applies to other unemployed workers). This intermittent protection is subject to conditions to which not all artistic workers are eligible. To get it (note that the government is currently working to reform these rules) you have to declare a large amount of working days (156 days) in the arts sector for a consecutive period of 18 months. After this, you will have to declare at least 3 days a year to see your unemployment benefits renewed. It is a (hard) way to get a relatively stable status when working in the arts sector – and especially performing arts. And accessing this protection is at the heart of many professional strategies – which consist of getting the highest declaration of work in the arts sector you can have during the first years you claim unemployment benefits.

This modality of work is common in the French-speaking part of Belgium – and more precisely in the Brussels area, where the Smart cooperative is mainly located. In the Dutch-speaking part of the country, artistic workers are more often self-employed and do not claim this salary-like unemployment benefit system (Bataille and De Brabandère 2021). This is why our observations concern specifically the musicians and other artistic workers located in or near the Brussel.

Working in the performing arts in Belgium: when diversification is not an option

Figure 2 represents the relationship between two variables. First, the concentration rate of work declarations of the Smart members who declare activities in music, dance or theater on the y axis. Second, the amount of work days declared through Smart by members in these several categories on the x axis.

Fig. 2. Amount of workdays and sectorial concentration



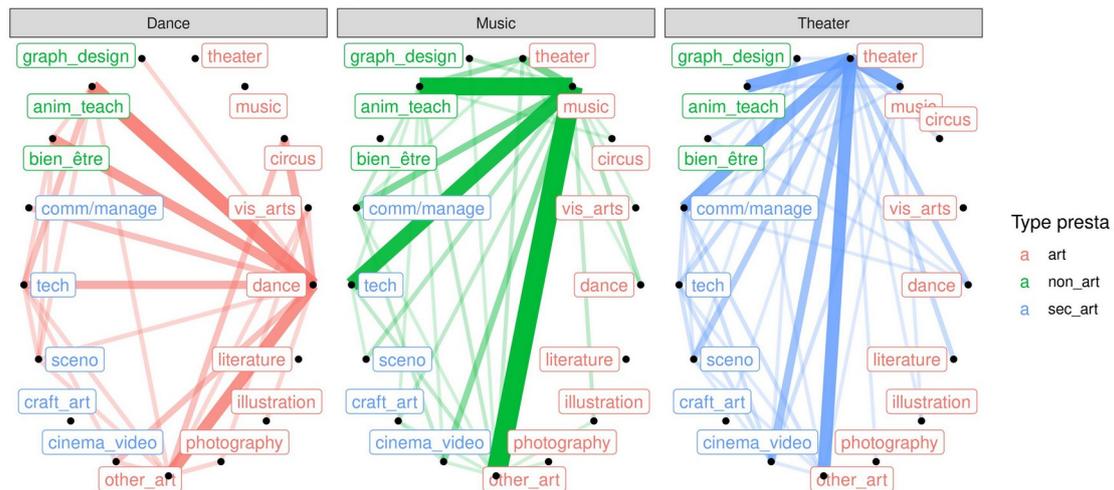
You can see here that there is a clear relationship between these two variables. The more one works (in term of working days), the more diversified the set of tasks. The amount of declared work days is in average higher among those who are not

100% musicians or 100% dancers or 100% comedians. For “ordinary” workers, being a “pure” musician is more common among those who declared few working days – that is among those who are probably less likely to make a living from their art skills. In other words, the more you try to make a living from your artistic skills, the more you will probably have to diversify your set of tasks, whether you are a dancer, a comedian or a musician. This tendency may be favored by the Belgian unemployment scheme, where it is necessary to obtain sufficient declaration of working days to access unemployment benefits. Note that we call “musicians” people who mainly declared musical-performing activities through Smart. We apply the same logic to theater and dance. From this point of view, there are no clear differences among Smart ordinary workers with respect to the main performing arts sectors in which they are found.

Nevertheless, if we take a closer look at the kind of tasks performed by comedians, musicians and dancers besides their “main” activity, they differ significantly. We classified all the activities that we can capture through Smart declarations into three types: in Figure 3, artistic activities – in red; activities in the art sector who are not considered as art – in blue; the activities outside the art sector – in green. Our idea was to distinguish the “pluri-activity” situation – where artistic activities are in concurrence with other kind of activities – and the “mutli-activity” situation – where workers can reinforce their artistic activities with activities close to their main artistic activity (Bureau et al. 2009).

In Figure 3, we represent the network of tasks co-declared by Smart members. The more tasks are cited together, the thicker the line is. Here, you can see that the main difference between musicians and comedians is the type of tasks they have alongside their main activity. Musicians (and dancers) have stronger connections with activities outside the art sector, like teaching. When musicians are in a “multi-activity” situation, they are mainly invested in technical tasks. Comedians are more often invested in other artistic activities or in activities close to artistic activities – and are less often “pluri-active” than others performing arts workers.

Fig. 3. Co-declared work tasks among Belgian artistic workers
The case of Smart members (2010-2014)



Data: Smart 2010-2014

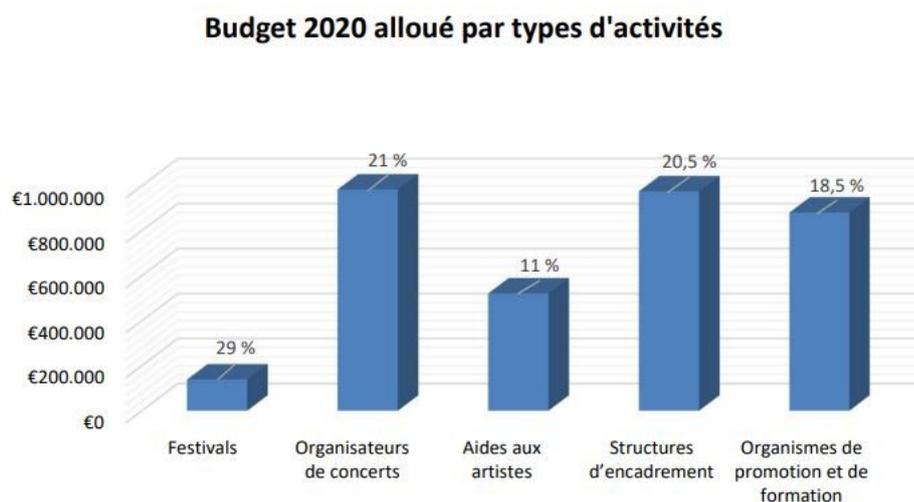
Layout: P. Bataille, Louise de Brabandère et P. Desmarez - mistakes Bataille only

Such differences can be explained by many factors – such as gender or social background. Indeed, dancers are mainly women and more than 70% of comedian members of Smart have a university degree. Nevertheless, such differences are also a matter of organizational factors as, Louise observes in her qualitative work.

Yet, Some Structural Differences...

Some structural differences can be found in the functioning of public grants for each world of art. In fact, grants in French-speaking Belgium are organized by sections: "popular music", "classical and contemporary music", "theater", "dance", "circus and fairground arts".

While there are multi-year grants (3 or 5 years) for theater and dance companies, grants for popular music are more project-based. Structural subsidies are granted to intermediaries for distribution (concert halls, festivals), support (labels, production agencies, booking and management) and promotion/training (structures with information missions, workshops, general promotion of a type of music). In the following graph, we can see the repartition of the budget between these different grants



Source: activity report 2020, non-classical music commission Fédération Wallonie Bruxelles

The “grant for artists” is occasional and not structural, which is why the amounts are lower in the overall budget. For example grant for artists could be for the recording and promotion of an album for example. In fact, 50% of the artists apply for this support according to the report. In 2020, they amount to just over 4 000 euros for each musician or music group who applied. The coupled grants (recording, promotion and residence) amount to between 7 000 and 15 000 euros.

The theater company *Foxes* shows another way of working. It is funded for three years and renewed every year. The wife of one of the artistic directors, who is also an actor in several of their shows, is in charge of the administration. The company hires comedians, a scenographer, a sound designer and a stage manager through its association during residencies, rehearsal and shows. Like other small and

medium-sized companies, it outsources the administration to an external social secretariat. In addition to public grants, the company supports the creation of its shows thanks to cultural institutions that are co-producers. These links to institutions are requested in the files of public grants, guaranteeing a form of artistic and professional recognition. A third source of funding for the company is, when the show is created, the price of each performance, which then contributes to the salaries of comedians and the technical staff (stage management).

This difference is explained by Sylvie who works both as a jazz project leader and a performer in dance shows. She explains that even small dance projects are structurally supported :

"I have the feeling that young choreographers get in touch with places more quickly and have partnerships more quickly, either for co-production or in any case ... because you need a place to rehearse in fact. It can't be done in your living room, whereas if I get a saxophonist and a pianist together, well, there you go. If there is a piano somewhere, at his place, at her place, whatever... So it's already possible to work. In dance that means lighting, that means ... Well, for those who involve that in it. So there is more quickly constitution of a file with a note of intention, with a precise object or a direction of research. Finally, something that allows you to ask for support from cultural institutions "

Sylvie, 35 years old, dance and music interpretation/teaching/unemployment benefits.

The grants make it possible to pay the invisible work of creation and rehearsal in a different way: as we have seen, few musicians have access to subsidies for residency periods: only 18% of applications in 2020).

The issue of remuneration for invisible work leads to other questions that are fundamental to sustaining an artistic career. In particular, the question of access to intermittent work protection, which depends today (and after the reform, probably) on quantitative criteria (amount of work days / remuneration). This brings us to the next point, the effects of these structural differences on the professional situations of workers in the performing arts.

... That frame work situations

These structural differences seem to have repercussions on the employment situations of arts workers. Most of the musicians interviewed, even those in pluriactivity situations, declare their work through Smart – or other means that do not provide access to the social protections of a salaried contract (compensation, black). They are not employed by the structures that hire them, even if they are employees from Smart, bringing them closer to the work reality of a freelancer.

These differences in workers' employment situations can be heard through comparisons made by workers moving from one artistic world to another. We will see what are saying Sylvie and Mathieu.

It is the case of Sylvie, a 35-year-old dancer and musician. She earns approximately 1500 euros per month (in 2019). Her primary source of income is performances as a dancer for a well-known contemporary dance company (600 euros) and as a singer in jazz music projects (200 euros). Her second source of income is unemployment benefits, 500 euros per month. Her third source of income is private singing lessons. The rest, *"Marketing and royalties, is peanut"*. In the course of her

career, Sylvie was a dancer in a Corps de Ballet and then began higher studies in jazz singing. Since there, she works as a teacher and creates her own projects. She later returned to contemporary dance. She explains that the similarity of the stage work allows her to capitalize on the resources she accumulated during her time as a Corps de Ballet. She explains that she learned to be on stage, gaining confidence by the number of times (200 times, as opposed to 20 times a year with her music groups) that she dances on stage with the Ballet. She also explains that she learned the canvassing game by applying to several ballets when she was 17. Now that she is 35 and that she has been dancing for 2 years for the same contemporary dance show, she has the feeling – and the fear - of having lost that skill: dare to call, make herself visible, propose a show, and negotiate a price... to find places to play with her music groups. During the interview, Sylvie points out the differences in terms of opportunity to play, the size of the cultural institutions, support during the tours, the length of the contracts between contemporary dance show and her music groups.

This is also what Mathieu has noticed. He earns a little more than 2,000 euros per month. Two thirds of his income comes from teaching as a piano teacher in public schools with permanent contract. These conditions do not allow him to benefit from the protection of intermittence. He earns about 700 euros in fees "in black and it's on average because you can have a big thing and then nothing", 150 from services to musicians for composition, arrangement, or for making scores. Recently, he has been hired as a musician to play on stage in theater shows. He laughs at the differences in working conditions:

"This show was very successful everything was organized, you had a small travel package [...] compared to the tours that we do with friends in a van, where we barely have enough money to pay for our overheads. Where you go to sleep at four o'clock in the morning because you played super late and the next day you have to get up at eleven o'clock to go and play 500 km to another Spanish village, well you see it's different. [With the theater company] you go to a place, the technicians set up the show. You go to sleep the next day, you play at night, you go to sleep. You play again the next day...And you have a hotel room, well nothing to do with it! And then you have all the technicians around who are more than us [on stage] you know. There were 5-6 of them each time to set up the play, transport the truck with the set and everything.

Mathieu, 29 years old, teaching/composition and piano interpretation

Yet, the entire set of biographical interviews, that I don't have time to discuss, shows stable professional situations for certain musicians approaching the realities of the show business and unstable for actors knocking on the doors of schools and companies to offer their services, or even for urban dancers doing gigs for bar mitzvah.

Conclusion

Our quantitative and qualitative results shows some similarities between music, dance and theater worlds of art. We have seen that the need for diversification is shared by all musicians, actors and dancers who try to make a living from it.

However, there are structural differences, such as the way grants are allowed in Belgium. As such, we have seen that musicians and music organizations of popular music do not benefit from sustainable funding. This structural reality has impacts on the working and employment conditions of performing artists. Results also shows differences in how musicians, comedians and dancers diversify their bundle of tasks. Where music and dance are more connected to para or non-artistic fields (technical and teaching activities), theater mainly shows connections with other artistic disciplines.

The aim of this presentation was to initiate a comparison of the functioning of different art worlds. Going beyond aesthetic differences allows us to look at working and employment conditions and organization of work. As such, the paradigm of the ordinary artistic worker leads us to consider similarities between a comedian animating a labyrinth as a mascot, a hip-hop dancer giving a workshop at a street fair and a musician playing covers in a restaurant every Thursday night. It defends the idea that a scale of analysis taking into account several art worlds is heuristic in terms of the sociology of work and organizations. Yet, we saw that there are some structural differences in Belgium between the way musicians, actors and dancers have different types of subsidies. These structural and organizational reasons seem to have more impact on the professional situations of artists than the disciplines as such. Thus, workers manage to articulate professional activities that fit in terms of skills, similarity of practices, temporalities, economic and symbolic rewards ... all within their fields of possibilities.

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