

Article URL:

http://topics.maydaygroup.org/articles/2025/Tullberg_2025.pdf

Envisioning an Adaptive Music Career:

A Framework for Imagination and Navigation of a Professional Future

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the complex relationship between performance programs in higher music education and the evolving demands of current and future professional music scenes. Drawing upon career anchor theory and enactive cognitive science, it introduces a workshop-based framework to support students in reflecting on future working life. The framework decenters ideas of entrepreneurship and market logics in favor of artistic curiosity and musical identity. As a key component of the framework, the practice session is conceptualized as a continuous sense-making process and the core engine of an adaptive music career.

Keywords: higher music education, music career, workshop, sense-making, practice, entrepreneurship

Introduction

The relationship between performance programs in higher music education (HME) and the evolving demands of current and future professional music scenes is complex. Institutions of HME are responding to this situation in different ways. While entrepreneurial approaches, designed to equip students with business skills to craft their own success, are gaining ground, alternative conceptions of professionalism are also brought forth. This article outlines a *framework for adaptive music careers* (FAMC), which is devised to help music students envision future working life beyond entrepreneurship and market logics. FAMC is intended to support workshop discussions within HME and draws upon concepts from career anchor theory and enactive cognitive

theory. I originally developed this framework in preparation of two workshops held at the Malmö Academy of Music (Lund University) in 2024.

The core of the article is the step-wise construction of FAMC, illustrated by figures, theoretical explanations and the narrative of Jenny, a jazz guitar player. To conclude, I focus on the practice¹ session. I argue that developing an adaptive approach to practice during the student years is vital for navigating the challenges that different career stages may pose. While “adaptive” in music education often refers to teaching that is tailored to the needs of learners (see Parsons et al. 2018) this article uses the term to describe students’ cognitive and behavioural flexibility.

Background

This section covers the background and central theoretical concepts of FAMC in three parts: (i) Higher Music Education and Employability focuses on students’ transition from academia to professional work and includes a critique of the entrepreneurial approach; (ii) Sense-making in Musical Practice applies enactive cognitive science to describe life-long musical learning; (iii) Self-Concept and Adaptability presents the key components of the career identity approach.

Higher Music Education and Employability

Many scholars have explored the connection between performance programs in HME and professional music scenes (Gaunt et al. 2021; Georgii-Hemming et al. 2020; Hayashi et al. 2024; Timmons 2023). Although institutional changes may be slow (Duffy 2013), societal, technological, and political transformations of labour markets are rapid and profound (Chen et al. 2020). Skill forecasting is inherently imprecise, making it difficult to predict graduates’ career paths and corresponding skill requirements (Bridgstock 2011). Thus, there are challenges for students transitioning from studies to work and sustaining a healthy career over time (Bartleet et al. 2019; Gee and Yeow 2021).

HME has traditionally been informed by technical rationales (Westerlund and Karttunen 2024) as well as aesthetic ideals that promote ideas of elitism and absolute music—in other words, music as an autonomous art form (Regelski 2019). The tradition

holds that “conservatoires are specialist institutions with a pedagogy that focuses sharply on the artistic, technical, professional, and intellectual development of the individual student” (Duffy 2013, 174). In short, technological advancements, the rapid dynamics of labor markets, and underlying educational ideologies prompt HME institutions to renegotiate their relationships with the professional field and the society of which this field is a part.

The entrepreneurial pull. Entrepreneurship is increasingly promoted within HME to address issues of employability and professionalization (An 2022; Duffy 2013; Lorenzo de Reizábal and Benito Gomez 2025; Prokop and Reitsamer 2024; Sadler 2021; Timmons 2023). Proponents of the entrepreneurial approach argue that entrepreneurial skills are necessary for a career, and it is therefore essential that HME covers topics such as marketing, financial literacy, leadership, and “opportunities, recognition and utilization” (Hayashi et al. 2024, 60). Entrepreneurial skills are also believed to support musicians in need of “retooling, reimagining, or reinventing a career midway through life” (Timmons 2023, 21). Jill Timmons (2023) considers entrepreneurship to be a “dynamic outgrowth of our changing culture” and an inevitable response to “severe budget cuts, cost-cutting measures, and concerns for stable financial support for the arts” (21). Given this, students cannot be expected “to follow archaic career models. Their future is firmly grounded in the market place” (Timmons 2023, 21). Although entrepreneurialism already has a history in the educational sector, within HME it is still described as a well-needed “shift in mindset” (Hayashi et al. 2024, 72) among young musicians. Critiques of the entrepreneurial approach argue that HME institutions “increasingly embrace this function by shifting their focus away from the general employability of students towards entrepreneurship courses and curricula that teach students how to develop an entrepreneurial career identity” (Prokop and Reitsamer 2024, 3). The potential risk is that art education programs adapt to market logics, embracing ideas of personal branding, commodification, and marketing, instead of focusing on practical music skills relevant to the artistic challenges ahead. In the same vein, Zack Moir et al. (2025) refer to the concept of a *business ontology*, which they claim influences conceptions of higher (popular) music education today. Teaching approaches underpinned by such a rationale “reject the potential for multiplicities and lead to a

settled view of the field which is shaped by, and generally seeks to ape², industry norms” (Moir et al. 2025, 186). Doing so, HME curricula rely on principles of domestication as they “serve as a way to train, condition, and enculturate students into a mindset that directly links their understanding of the purposes of education to their potential to compete with their peers” (Moir et al. 2025, 190).

Alternatively, HME institutions may embrace entrepreneurialism by decentering its corporate connotations and reconceptualizing it as “dynamic artistry” (Ski-Berg and Røyseng 2024, 196) or social/cultural entrepreneurship (Gaunt et al. 2021). Katherine Sadler (2021) also raises the issue of “whether all students pursuing education in the performing arts have the structural support necessary to build and access the [necessary] social capital networks” (149). Furthermore, there may be detrimental implications of promoting the notion of solitary individual accountability (Sadler 2021).

Alternatives to the entrepreneurial approach. Institutions of HME are also exploring ideas beyond entrepreneurship to support students’ transition into their professional roles. Such ideas include student-centered pedagogic approaches (Ski-Berg and Røyseng 2024), challenging the “predominantly mono-directional teaching” (Minors et al. 2024, 2) of the conservatoire tradition. This agenda of student autonomy (Duffy 2013) “assists students in developing the propensity and abilities necessary to take personal responsibility for their own career development in an ongoing way, including the responsive acquisition and deployment of necessary work skills” (Bridgstock 2011, 13). Similarly, changes within HME include the role of critical reflection on the craft of musicianship and artistic practice in a broader sense (Duffy 2013; Gaunt et al. 2021). Collaborative learning is promoted to develop cooperative skills and ways to better understand one’s own expertise (Duffy 2013). As the wording of the above quotes suggests, even approaches that seek to move away from entrepreneurialism may resonate with the principles of a business ontology (Moir et al., 2025).

As an extension of the institutional changes, HME may “reconstruct its societal relationship” (Westerlund and Gaunt 2021, xv) and more actively participate in the surrounding society (Duffy 2013; Eidsaa and Kharatyan 2024). Doing so decenters individualist pedagogical approaches (Daniel and Parkes 2019) and offers “encouraging supportive, collective, and community-based action as an alternative” (Sadler 2021,

149). Helena Gaunt et al. (2021) argue that artistic creativity and societal relevance are complementary. Their three-fold model of musicians as makers in society integrates musicians' identity, craft, and societal impact. The present article aligns with this view, framing musicianship as dynamic and socially grounded.

Sense-making in Musical Practice

Sense-making is a central concept within enactive cognitive theory. It is beyond the scope of this article to fully flesh out how this concept relates to music education (for examples, see Schiavio and van der Schyff 2018; Schiavio and van der Schyff 2024; Silverman 2020; van der Schyff et al. 2022; van der Schyff 2015). In short, sense-making refers to the process through which individuals cognitively and emotionally derive meaning by integrating new knowledge with prior experiences (Weichold 2018) through thought and sensorimotor action. This process is dynamic and based on an understanding of cognition as involving a brain-body-world system, thus transcending the conventional divide between mind and matter (Martínez and Villanueva 2018). Sense-making is fundamentally relational, as it involves interactions with others (Weichold and Candioto 2023). The process is also context-dependent, as environmental factors influence how an individual constructs meaning and behaves (Weichold 2018).

A musical context emphasizes the embodied aspects of sense-making (Schiavio and van der Schyff 2018; Silverman 2020; van der Schyff et al. 2022) since an attentive listener “enacts music perception via the sensorimotor manipulation of sonic structures” (Krueger 2009, 104). For an instrumentalist, the musical instrument becomes a crucial component of the brain-body-world system. The notion of sense-making blurs the divide between analytical reflection and embodied engagement, as it “emphasizes the key role of body and action for the realization of cognition” (Schiavio and van der Schyff 2018, 4).

A sense-making process results in a state of resolved tension referred to as *equilibrium*. Equilibrium is not to be understood as static but as a dynamic state. Like a group of cyclists maintaining formation while speeding down a lane, it involves constant adjustments to internal and external forces (Di Paolo et al. 2017). Equilibrium in musical practice involves parameters such as technical skill, creativity, expression, musical

challenges, and ergonomics. Musical learning encompasses several ongoing, interactive processes shaped by sensorimotor and emotional responses to disruptions and restorations of this balance.

The enactive view holds “emotions as emergent properties of living systems—as ‘patterns’ of adaptive sense-making behavior” (van der Schyff 2022, 104). Thus, learning is part of the formation of personhood as learners adapt and “maintain their musical unity—e.g., a meaningful consistency with a specific musical model—through the constant negotiation of their identity” (Schiavio and van der Schyff 2018, 8). Andrea Schiavio and Dylan van der Schyff (2018) illustrate their argument with an example of how a novice guitarist learns a solo from a video. Initially, she might replicate the guitarist’s finger movements, but this approach can be overly general or too rigid. Instead, she will likely experiment through sensorimotor interaction with the instrument, exploring phrasing options while connecting with her musical identity and aesthetic preferences. Schiavio and van der Schyff (2018) sum up: “we suggest that richer forms of learning may be realized through a shift in focus from stable pre-given ‘skills’ to be acquired to a more open horizon of less predictable and exploratory possibilities that emerge and develop constantly: a self-organizing process in which agents strive to maintain their adaptive stability and flourish as autonomous musical beings” (Schiavio and van der Schyff 2018, 12). As is clear from this example, an enactive approach to music education does not align with the business ontology highlighted by Moir et al. (2025) mentioned above.

Self-Concept and Adaptability

The first step of FAMC concerns the concept of *career anchors* (Schein 1996). Based on empirical research in the 1970s, the model remains an important instrument in career theory and workshops across different sectors (Woldeamanuel 2024). Schein (1996) differentiates between internal and external careers. The external career generally pertains to roles within an organization, such as job titles and academic credentials. For a freelancer engaged in a *boundaryless career* (Bridgstock 2011), the external career encompasses elements found in brief biographies or entries on Wikipedia. In essence, the markers of achievements are indicators of one’s position.

The internal career relates to personal values and a sense of meaning and is described through career anchors (Schein 1996). The career anchor is based upon one's self-concept, which consists of three components: (i) Self-perceived talents and abilities: What the individual—guided by feedback from others—thinks of as their strengths. (ii) Sense of motives: What an individual wants or needs. (iii) Values: The things held as important, such as activities, the social climate of working life, or how the work relates to society at large. The self-concept informs the career identity, a stabilizing force that guides decisions and orients individuals in times of challenges. Taken together, an individual gravitates towards one of eight career anchors (Schein 1996):

- *Security/Stability*: The value of long-term stability, predictable tasks, and loyalty, with economic security as a key term.
- *Autonomy/Independence*: The importance of independence, favoring self-directed work outside of organizational structures.
- *Lifestyle*: Here, professional life is one component of a larger life system, and the former needs to be supportive of the latter.
- *Technical/Functional Competence*: This career anchor centers on craftsmanship and expertise. Fulfillment is tied to challenge, development, and recognition.
- *General Managerial Competence*: The enjoyment of leadership, problem-solving, and decision-making, driven by creativity rather than financial gain or status.
- *Entrepreneurial Creativity*: The value of creating something new, such as one's own business and network of activities.
- *Service/Dedication to a Cause*: The strive to accomplish something meaningful in a wider societal context, which embodies the core values of an individual.
- *Pure Challenge*: The pleasure of taking on problems that might seem insurmountable. Overcoming one problem leads to the next.

Notably, career anchors are intuitive until an individual is faced with a decision that will impact important aspects of life and work. The career anchor denotes what one will not give up on without severe doubt or anxiety. In a working life that contains

continuous decisions, the “ability to analyze oneself, as well as the ability to figure out what kind of job is available and how that job will evolve, becomes a crucial skill” (Schein 1996, 85). Consequently, a career anchor is not a fixed point, but a guiding force. As long as the career identity is not challenged, the individual resides in a state of dynamic equilibrium (Sugiyama et al. 2024).

Adaptability in relation to career theory refers to the aptitude to adjust to disruptive forces through continuous development of skills such as problem-solving, self-reliance, collaboration, communication, core literacies, are essential workplace skills (Finch et al. 2023). The perspective of the adaptive career goes beyond the individual and emphasizes the role of collaborations (Finch et al. 2023) and cooperative skills. An adaptive career is situated. Exploration of the environment³ is part of the sense-making process and an important aspect of an adaptive career (Chong and Leong 2017; Zhao et al. 2022). Andrew Martin and Paul Evans (2022) refer to adaptability as the ability to respond to both negative and positive novel situations, as uncertainties are part of a musical career: “change is evident in terms of the different musicians with whom one will play and the numerous mentors, instructors, and conductors/directors one will encounter along the way; novelty is evidenced in the large range of repertoire that a musician must learn and master; with regard to transition, as musicians become more proficient, they will move from one level of technical difficulty to another and often one performance context to another” (Martin and Evans 2022, 638–39).

In FAMC, the adaptive stance refers to the potential to respond to change—positive, neutral, and negative. Seemingly positive changes, such as new opportunities, may cause negative emotions such as stress or anxiety for the individual musician (Martin and Evans 2022). Having outlined the building blocks of career anchor theory, sense-making and adaptability, I now turn to the construction of FAMC.⁴

A Framework for Adaptive Music Careers

FAMC revolves around the following six steps: (1) The Musician, (2) Challenges, (3) Responses, (4) Transitions, (5) The Path, and (6) The Practice Session. I make the case that this continuous process can be thought of as the core engine of a musical

career. Each step follows the same structure of theoretical exposition, figure, and narrative illustration.

Introducing Jenny

Jenny studies jazz guitar at an HME institution in Sweden. Up until the age of fifteen, however, she was a drummer, oriented towards pop and rock genres. Her interest in the guitar was spurred by her uncle, an amateur musician who organized open mic nights at a local bar. She discovered jazz in upper secondary school. Before attending university, she spent three years in preparatory courses developing her skills and refining her taste.

Jenny is about to enter the final year of her studies. She studies with a teacher who specializes in bebop, which is not Jenny's favourite subgenre. Furthermore, she finds the material too hard and complains that she cannot find a way to approach the repertoire. The teacher shows her how to break down the music and to analyze improvisational possibilities through fretboard positions. She appreciates the challenge and spends most part of the days in the practice rooms, improving her technique. She uses some practice principles that she developed herself, such as time management and journaling. Sometimes, before heading home, Jenny passes by the ensemble rooms to see if there is an after-school jam session. She finds it challenging to put into action what she has studied in the practice room but decides that her third and last year of studies will include more spontaneous ensemble playing.

Step 1: The Musician

Specifying Edgar H. Schein's (1996) general concept of career identities in a musical context might look like the following archetypes:

Security/Stability: The musician aspires to secure either a stable role within a music institution, such as an orchestra or a freelance engagement centralized around reliable commitments.

Autonomy/Independence: The musician is pursuing a solo career or aiming to be a highly sought-after session musician and/or to develop an online presence which provides an additional income.

Lifestyle: The circumstances that music affords the musician, whether during tours or within the musical communities of the local area, are held in high regard. The distinction between professional musicianship and recreational engagement in music may be blurred.

Technical/Functional Competence: Virtuosity represents a core idea for the ambitions of the musician. Likely, the musician is working to become a prominent performer, possibly by discovering a specific niche in which they can push the current technical boundaries.

General Managerial Competence: The musician gravitates towards leading roles in ensembles or projects. This does not necessarily mean being at the centre of attention but rather to be the one who enables others to do their best.

Entrepreneurial Creativity: The musician strives to realize musical projects, seeking funding, organizing tours, in short, making things happen.

Dedication to a Cause: The musician sees that music is an important component of society. It is a means to a higher end, for example by giving children's concerts or performing within the health sector.

Pure challenge: Challenges in a musical context can include, for example, high-stakes artistic projects, risky productions, or technical challenges. The pleasure of overcoming these challenges is a reward for the musician.

The figure (Figure 1) below displays the starting point of FAMC: the musician defined in terms of self-concept evolving over time.



Figure 1: Step 1. The basic structure of the series of models consists of a circle representing a musician's self-concept. The arrow below signifies that this self-concept evolves over time.

Jenny's self-concept and career anchor. Jenny's self-concept can be described in the following way:

Self-perceived abilities: Jenny thinks of herself as a skilled jazz and rock guitarist. She has a solid technique and is improving at improvisation. She enjoys writing tunes but has not developed that side of her musicianship.

Motives: Jenny is driven by the pleasure of mastery, pushing the boundaries of what she can do on the guitar. Attending the jam sessions is a way for her to measure her level of playing; it is where her skills are put to the test.

Values: Jenny has a strong work ethic. She could have chosen another career, but now that she has decided on a music degree she is going to make the most of it, aiming for a freelance career.

Career anchor: The career anchor that best describes Jenny is technical/functional competence.

Step 2: Challenges

Career anchors are influenced by socialization and education. They are not fixed but challenged by new experiences and evolve throughout life. Both stabilizing and

evolving forces form the basis of the dynamics of career identity (Sugiyama et al. 2024). The external forces that shape a musician's career can lead to unexpected opportunities and challenges (Finch et al. 2023), referred to as *triggers* and *career events*, depending on their magnitude and consequences (Figure 2). Triggers are minor decisions, interruptions, and experiences such as attending an inspiring masterclass or getting a new instrument. Career events encompass significant occurrences that can greatly impact a musician's path (Sugiyama et al. 2024).

Since economic insecurity is a reality for many professional musicians (Dobson 2011; King et al. 2024; Woolley and Christie 2021), the fragile balance between income and expenses can easily be subject to positive and negative triggers. Furthermore, there are challenges relating to physical and mental health (Nedelcut et al. 2018). Reputation is important to a freelance musician (Dobson, 2011) and publicity, such as reviews, can have significant impact on wellbeing (King et al. 2024). This fragility makes a musical career prone to quick turns and the risk-taking involved in a music career has been compared to gambling (Musgrave et al. 2024).

Examples of triggers and career events include securing a position in an orchestra, a recording that facilitates extensive touring, or being hired as a substitute for the first time in a major production. Both triggers and career events can be negative, such as emerging tinnitus, ergonomic concerns, or being laid off from an orchestra position.

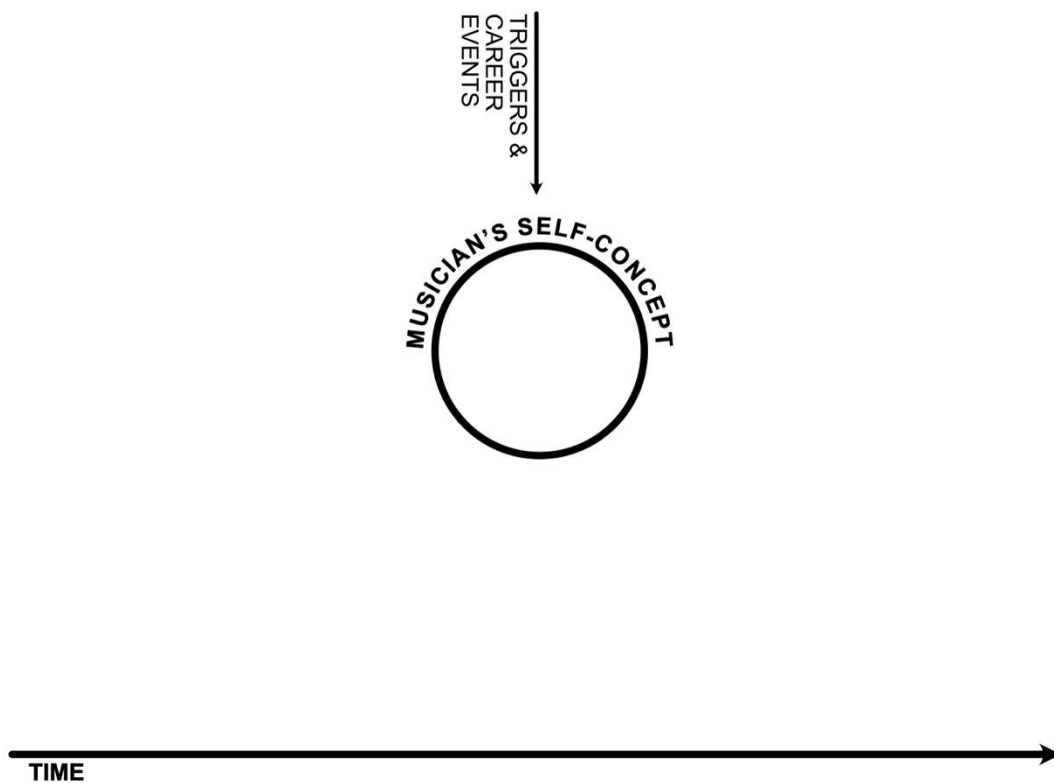


Figure 2: Step 2. Challenges conceptualized as triggers and career events.

Jenny's wrist—a career event. At the start of her final year, Jenny notices pain in her right hand. She ignores it at first but soon needs to act. Her guitar teacher and a medical specialist advise her to limit the guitar playing to an hour a day and her practice habits must be rebuilt. This is a hard blow for Jenny. She is faced with a choice of either taking a break in hope that her wrist heals or reschedule her studies to focus on composition. Although she enjoys composing music on the piano, she doubts that she will keep striving to become a professional musician. She decides to leave school, uncertain if she will come back.

Step 3: Responses

Triggers and career events challenge the self-concept and move an individual from a state of equilibrium to a destabilized state. Smaller challenges can be balanced through coping strategies such as connecting to family, preparation and practice, self-talk, and substance use (Pecen et al. 2018), but career events need more consequential

responses. The tensions arising from the destabilized state are addressed through *identity work*, which can reduce “emotional disturbances and facilitate sensemaking that allows people to figure out who they are” (Sugiyama et al. 2024, 145). As a form of renegotiation between anchoring forces (career identity) and evolving forces (triggers and events), identity work may decenter what was previously held as important in favour of new ideals. Through an individual’s identity work, a state of dynamic equilibrium can be restored (Sugiyama et al. 2024) (Figure 3). Identity work may result in harmful cycles of resentment and defensive attitude or positive cycles leading to positive transformation (Sugiyama et al. 2024). One method to accomplish this is by envisioning future iterations of oneself, thus renegotiating the personal narrative. Envisioning of *musical possible selves* can serve as a tool in self-directed learning (Creech et al. 2020).

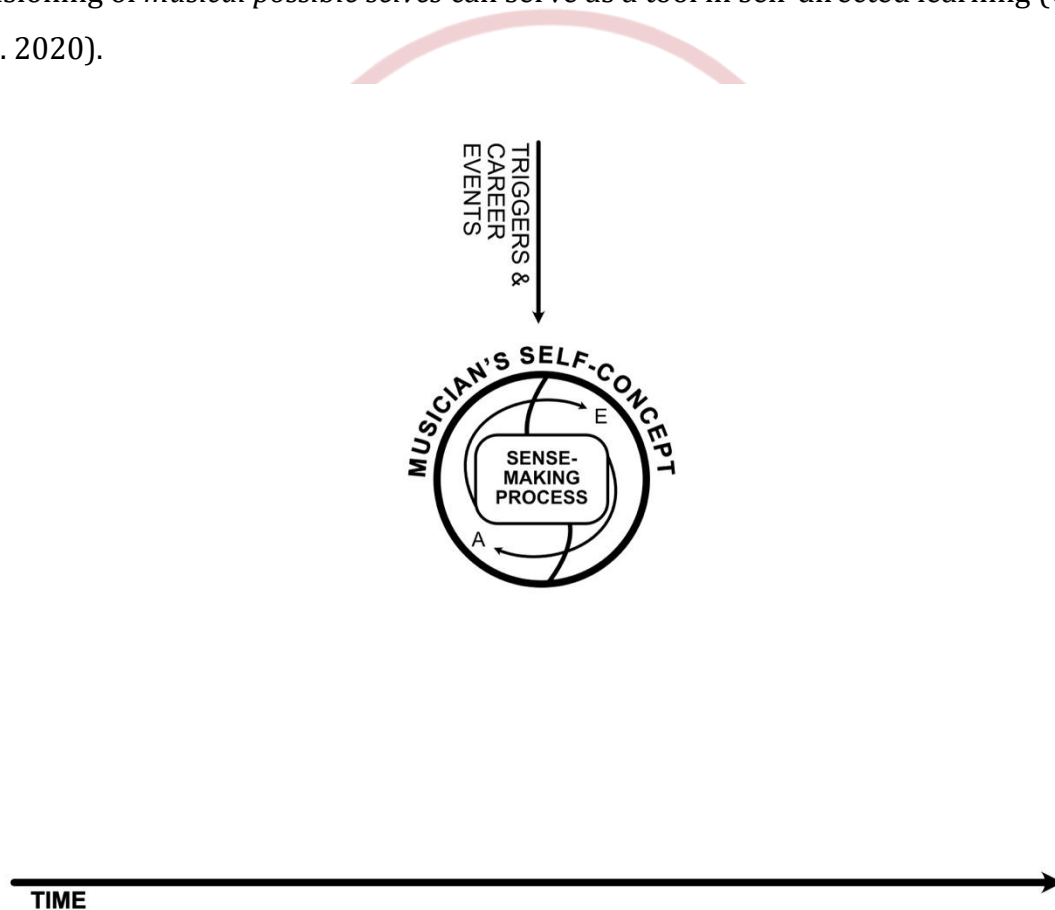


Figure 3: Step 3. Responses in terms of identity work as sense-making. The figure illustrates the dynamic between anchoring and evolving forces triggered by destabilising experiences. The figure is adapted from Keimei Sugiyama et al. (2024).

Jenny's response. Jenny returns home and takes a temporary music teaching job. While not musically fulfilling, she enjoys working with kids, and the income eases her financial stress. She also spends time at her uncle's music events at the local bar where she takes up drumming again.

While her hand slowly improves, she renegotiates her relationship with music. She wishes she could get back to her heavy practice and strive for technical virtuosity. However, participating in the jam sessions makes her appreciate the importance of musical communication, expressiveness and a sense of responsibility. Everyone involved in the event (including those in the audience) are contributing when the music gets going.

Eventually, Jenny goes back to school. To keep her wrist healing, she takes lessons in drumming and composition. She keeps her guitar practice limited and disciplined to rebuild her technique. She notices how her new relaxed technique combined with her reevoked drumming, influences her improvisational style. This change of style also influences her compositions. Her primary focus is the jam sessions. The social setting and the joint attention on a mutual sonic creation is what drives her. While she still practices individually, it now explicitly serves her goal of participating in group music-making. The break and her experiences during the year profoundly reshaped her relationship with music. The career event led to a change of career anchor, which is now best labelled *lifestyle*. Her ergonomic condition improves slowly, and the music she performs in her exam concert consolidates her new emerging musicianship. Teachers and fellow students appreciate the music that she presents.

Step 4: Transitions

Graduating from HME and entering a professional music scene means transitioning between musical arenas. While skillsets overlap, skills and knowledges are dependent on context (Lave and Wenger 1991). Students may excel academically yet struggle professionally, or vice versa. The gap between skillsets makes the transition potentially challenging (Gaunt et al. 2021; Georgii-Hemming et al. 2020; Hayashi et al. 2024; Timmons 2023).

Although entrepreneurial skills may be important to how the transition plays out, musical skills are still central to this process. More precisely, the ability to adapt to new musical situations and find a way to contribute to these situations is vital. In other words, the role of environmental exploration is important (Chong and Leong 2017; Zhao et al. 2022). In the context of FAMC such exploration provides opportunities for new experiences, causing a musician to cope with new challenges and thus further advance sense-making processes.

Next, I turn to two of the challenges of transition. The first is that the musician no longer has a guiding main instrumental teacher and the second is that the social platform of the education is no longer present (Figure 4).

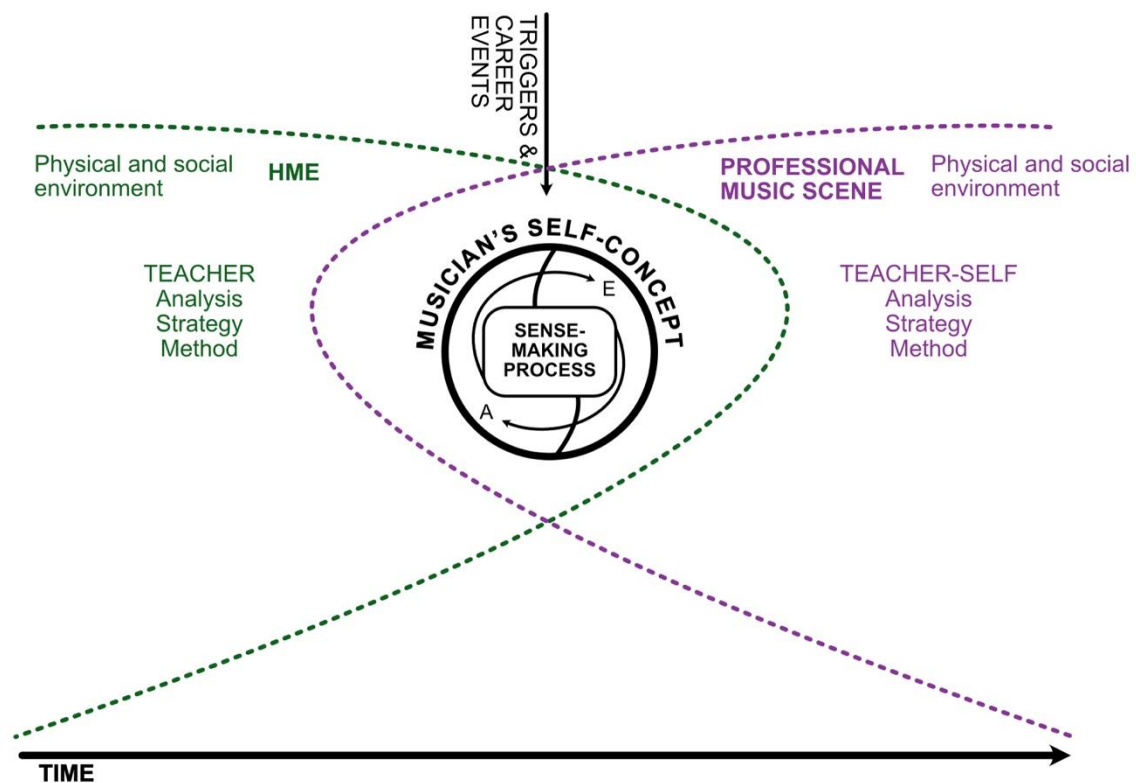


Figure 4: Step 4. Transitions. The figure shows how the student moves from one social field into another and needs to adopt the role of his or her own teacher while exploring the environment for possible collaborators.

Step 4a: The teacher. The most obvious roles of an instrumental or voice teacher within a traditional HME employability framework are to impart skills and facilitate

learning. Since studio tuition (one-to-one lessons) remains a central form of teaching within HME (Simones 2017), the role of the instrumental teacher is important. However, research about studio teaching practice is scarce since one-to-one tuition is somewhat of an “enigma, given that [the teaching] occurs behind closed doors” (Daniel and Parkes 2019). Instrumental teaching within HME can be considered as a set of complex tasks relating to personality, values, motives, professional knowledge, professional skills, and social ability (Yi and Mazlan 2024). Teachers may also be supportive in ways that extend beyond musical challenges and approach more of a mentoring role (Pecen et al. 2018). Many studio teachers are both performers and educators, and although this balancing act may be challenging (Conway 2020; Parkes et al. 2015), recent experiences from professional performances are valuable in the educational role. Often, individual teachers “are the main source of professional know-how and contacts as well as being expert technical coaches and artistic mentors” (Duffy 2013, 174). The teachers’ continuous experiences in the professional field keeps them attuned to current skill demands. The sometimes-intuitive analysis of professional requirements is important since it forms the basis for teaching strategies. Donald Schön (1983) calls this analytical process the *problem-setting phase*. In professional practice, the process may be implicit, since the skills or repertoire needed for professional survival may seem taken for granted or handed down by tradition. However, “musicianship—the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values required for any musicking—is not fixed or singular” (Regelski 2009, 191). For example, the professional preconditions change over time and are likely different from when the teacher was established in the profession. This includes the challenges and possibilities of digitalization (Darvish and Bick 2024; Gilbert and Salazar 2025) and the mere fact that musical traditions are more fluid and prone to change than static (Schippers 2009).

Even though the graduating student may be surrounded by peers, developing an analytic and strategic approach is essential to shaping an adaptive career (Finch et al. 2023; Mondo et al. 2021). Consequently, it is a widely accepted idea that a learner must become their own teacher (Creech et al. 2020; Lei and Mohamad Nasri 2024; Ljungar-Chapelon 2008; McPherson and Zimmerman 2011).

To sum up: Not only does the young musician have to be responsible for sustaining and developing the required technical level of musicianship, they have to develop a metacognitive stance towards what to learn and how to go about it (McPherson and Zimmerman 2011). In FAMC, this adaptive stance is conceptualized as analysis, strategy, and method. Analysis is the ability to discern what to learn or engage in, strategy is how to proceed in doing so and finding the necessary resources. Method refers to how this strategy is concretely implemented in the practice session.

Jenny as her own teacher. Jenny's final year of studies was challenging. Since she took lessons in composition and drumming, her guitar practice was unguided. Having the restrictions as a basic principle, she figured out the details herself based upon previous instructions. She was struggling at first but soon developed a confidence in her ability to structure the practice.

Leaving the academy, she sticks to her new routines. Even though her wrist keeps improving, she is careful about her practice. The previous challenges proved to be preparatory for her emerging career. She takes an analytical stance towards her musicianship, deciding that developing her style and compositions are crucial elements in shaping a niche as a freelance musician.

Step 4b: Collaborations. While HME can be a competitive milieu (Dobson 2011), education provides a social setting for good or worse. However, after graduation, the social context of the education environment is no longer present.

As mentioned above, there are uncertainties in a musical career. Reporting from a research project with professionals within creative disciplines, Goodwin (2019) states that, "for research participants, participation in communities of practice is the antidote to these stressors" (Goodwin 2019, 128). Furthermore Kim Goodwin (2019) observes that "in comparison with those in theatre, festival curation, and film screenwriting, those in digital design, visual arts, and music took a more individualistic approach to their development" (127). It is unclear if the dire position of music in Goodwin's (2019) study is a sign of a general tendency. However, the focus on individual achievement within HME is documented elsewhere (Woolley and Christie 2021) and fits well with the "insularity involved in hours of solo practice" (Dobson 2011), as well as the promotion of entrepreneurship (Sadler 2021). Thus, it is vital for the newcomer to the professional

field to find peers and to form collaborations. One form of collaborative opportunity is to actively seek informal mentors (Finch et al. 2023). Such collaborations can be deepened into what is called *career coupling* (Wagner 2022) through which experts and newcomers form a collaboration over time in order to support each other's careers.

Jenny's collaborations. Given her aptitude for musical meetings and jam sessions, Jenny establishes herself on the local music scene. Inspired by her uncle, she eventually starts hosting her own musical events on an irregular basis. She forms her own band from the circle of musicians attending the sessions. As band leader, she keeps developing her compositions and her rhythmically driven improvisational style. Although she does not have a formal teacher, more experienced musicians in the community serve as mentors, guiding her into the structural concerns of a musical career. One of these established musicians, Harry, especially praises her rhythmical style of playing. His compliments inspire her.

Step 5: The path

A boundaryless career, unlike a hierarchical one, is not confined to a specific organization and is characterized by its non-linear nature (Bridgstock 2011; Mondo et al. 2021). When a professional path is open, the question arises of how to determine the next move. One way to approach this question is to figure out how one's professional life can be more attuned towards the career anchor (Schein 1996) and to let the internal career drive the external career. A musician aligned with autonomy/independence is likely to seek out opportunities to earn an income that is less dependent on fixed ensembles. A musician identifying with the anchor of general managerial competence will purposefully explore the environment and organize collaborations where they can have everyone perform at their best.

Understanding the professional music scene as a social field (here understood broadly as involving both musicians and audience), the newcomer may slowly progress towards a more central role, thus having both more impact and more responsibility. Doing so transforms the identity (Wenger 1998), but there are also material conditions associated with a positive path. Improved material conditions may not be goals in themselves, but tools with which the musician can have a life more aligned with their

career anchor. For a musician, this may mean more high-stakes gig opportunities (technical/functional competence), invitations to intriguing collaborations (lifestyle), increased fees (stability), or organizing workshops on issues of importance (dedication to a cause).

Shaping a positive path, a musician needs to offer value which may be constituted by skills that open up new ways of interacting with others, such as performing, teaching, collaborating in ensembles, applying for grants, engaging in community work—all connected to the musical scene. Raymond MacDonald and Suvi Saarikallio (2024) expand musical excellence to include social and creative virtuosity alongside technical skill. Depending on the career path, skills like listening, collaboration, and co-creation may be equally vital. Here, the role of the teacher-self is essential in identifying what skills are relevant within the dynamics of the professional field (Figure 5).

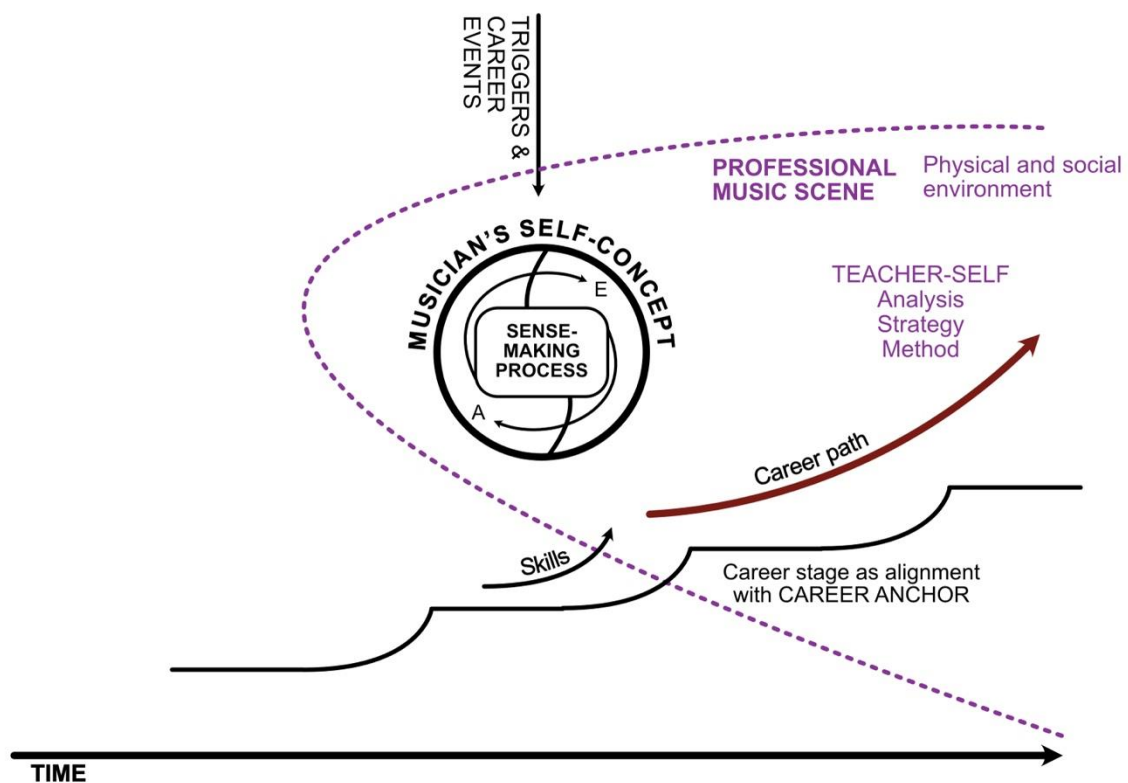


Figure 5: Step 5. The path. The figure illustrates how new skills of value to the professional music scene can work as a means towards progress. This progress is relevant in terms of how it relates to the musician's career anchor. In this process the role of the teacher-self addresses the need for analysis, strategy and method.

Jenny's choice. During the two years following her graduation, Jenny enjoys her musical life despite economic struggles. Her band is invited to a few gigs in the local area, but the fees are low, so she takes a few jobs on the side. Still, the jam sessions are her primary space for inspiration. For one night, the regular group of musicians is joined by a visiting musician. Jenny is intrigued by the unusual melodic patterns of his improvisations. When he does not play solo, he is able to play chord notes on open strings while making small melodic fills higher up on the fretboard. While playing, Jenny figures out that the guitar is tuned differently. She asks him during the break, and he shows her his tunings and the way he uses a capo to find new melodic and harmonic structures. Inspired, Jenny can see how different guitar tunings can emphasise her own rhythmical playing, using more open strings and percussive effects. She devotes some of her practice time to exploring and developing this idea on her extra guitar. She brings the retuned guitar to the jam sessions to try out the ideas.

A few months later, Jenny is faced with a choice: accept a secure teaching job in her hometown or join Harry's band for the upcoming tour. The band needs someone to fill in for the regular guitarist. Harry has noticed Jenny's new playing techniques and thinks it would be a nice fit with the band's mixture of jazz, folk music, and free improvisation. However, Jenny finds the music to be well outside her musical comfort zone. The choice is hard. Although she enjoys teaching, it was not what she imagined when she graduated. Also, the geographical distance means that she cannot continue her current collaborations and even if she enjoys her uncle's music nights, her hometown cannot pride itself with a thriving music scene. On the other hand, the job would mean a secure income. The tour would be musically exciting and bring about new experiences. However, even if it means a series of paid gigs, the economic future is still uncertain. Intuitively guided by her career anchor of lifestyle, she decides to accept the invitation to join the tour. This means that she will spend the next month practicing and rehearsing the new repertoire.

Step 6: The practice session

As mentioned above, the practice session can be the core of a career and a space for sense-making (Figure 6). The practice session therefore may encompass everything

from skill acquisition to identity work. As such it is a form of “metabolic and emotional” (Schiavio and van der Schyff 2018, 8) response to new musical experiences and can also be a means of emotional regulation (Krueger, 2018). But what does this mean in the case of Jenny? I will step into her practice session and let it unfold.

Harry sends Jenny material to practice before the first rehearsal. The material consists of a set of recordings from rehearsals and sheet music of new tunes. Included are videos of the regular guitarist performing some of the repertoire. Jenny finds the music unfamiliar, with strange forms, harmonic progressions and tonality that are ungraspable at first. Jenny doubts that she will learn, let alone master, the repertoire. She tries to find an apt strategy to learn the material, but she also wants to develop her own musicianship and make a personal contribution to the ensemble.

In line with the principles of sense-making, the period of practice that follows is understood as an exploration of the material informed by Jenny’s musical expertise and her aptitude for mastering new forms of musical expression. This process can be divided into a series of overlapping characteristics.

Practice as musical sense-making is:

Adaptive: During the years since graduation, Jenny has mainly practiced technique, played her own music, or improvised. Learning completely new music, she returns to the strategies from her struggles with bebop. The music is different, but the methods are valid after adjustments.

Situated: She organizes her practice environment. During her years as a student, she used the academy’s practice rooms without giving it much thought. Now, she can devote a corner of her apartment to the structured practice she is about to undertake. She has quick and reliable access to all material she needs, including recording devices. After a break, the organized structure of her environment supports her continuous process.

Social: Jenny feels a responsibility to learn the material as best she can. Harry puts trust in her, and at times the feeling of obligation drives her practice. Later in the process, when she starts to grasp the material and realizes that she will come to the rehearsal well prepared, this social dimension of her practice session instils a sense of joy. Seeing herself as part of the band redirects her from the self-criticism otherwise associated with

individual practice (Dobson 2011). Although she is by herself, the social dynamic of the ensemble shapes the activities of the practice session.

Embodied: To say that musical practice is embodied might seem like a banal statement. However, from a sense-making perspective the exploration of the music through sensorimotor interaction with the guitar is also a way of theoretically understanding the music. Even conceptual thought is grounded in sensorimotor interaction with the world (Alessandroni et al. 2024) and as noted by Joel Krueger (2009): “the skills needed to become attuned to novel sonic affordances are sensorimotor skills” (110). For Jenny, the unfamiliar structures of form, tonality and harmony are uncovered through finger movements.

Emotional: Practicing implies active listening and sensorimotor engagement in music. The fraction of Jenny’s musical identity arising in the challenge to learn the material creates a pendulum movement between frustration and satisfaction. She recalls her emotional response to the bebop lessons from her HME teacher. She knows that the frustration will pass and that it helps her to break down the music in smaller parts.

Explorative: Spending time with the material, Jenny starts to see underlying musical structures, reappearing idiomatic figures and harmonic patterns, thus making sense of the various musical parameters (van der Schyff 2015). Her perception is attuned to the new musical landscape, and she discriminates increasingly finer details. She can now elaborate on the music, making aesthetic choices and more explicitly draw upon her previous skills. She integrates her own rhythmical style into the repertoire and exploits the possibilities of her experimental guitar tunings. The results of her intense practice could not have been foreseen in a strict goal-oriented strategy.

Integrative: The new movement patterns and her perceptual attunement are integrated in Jenny’s relationship with the guitar. Her new skills and understandings are integrated into her musical being, hence, her musical unity is restored (Schiavio and van der Schyff 2018). The frustrated state of mind evolved into a state of dynamic equilibrium. The new techniques and repertoire reshape Jenny’s relationship with the guitar and open new possibilities for musical and social interaction (Martínez and Villanueva 2018).

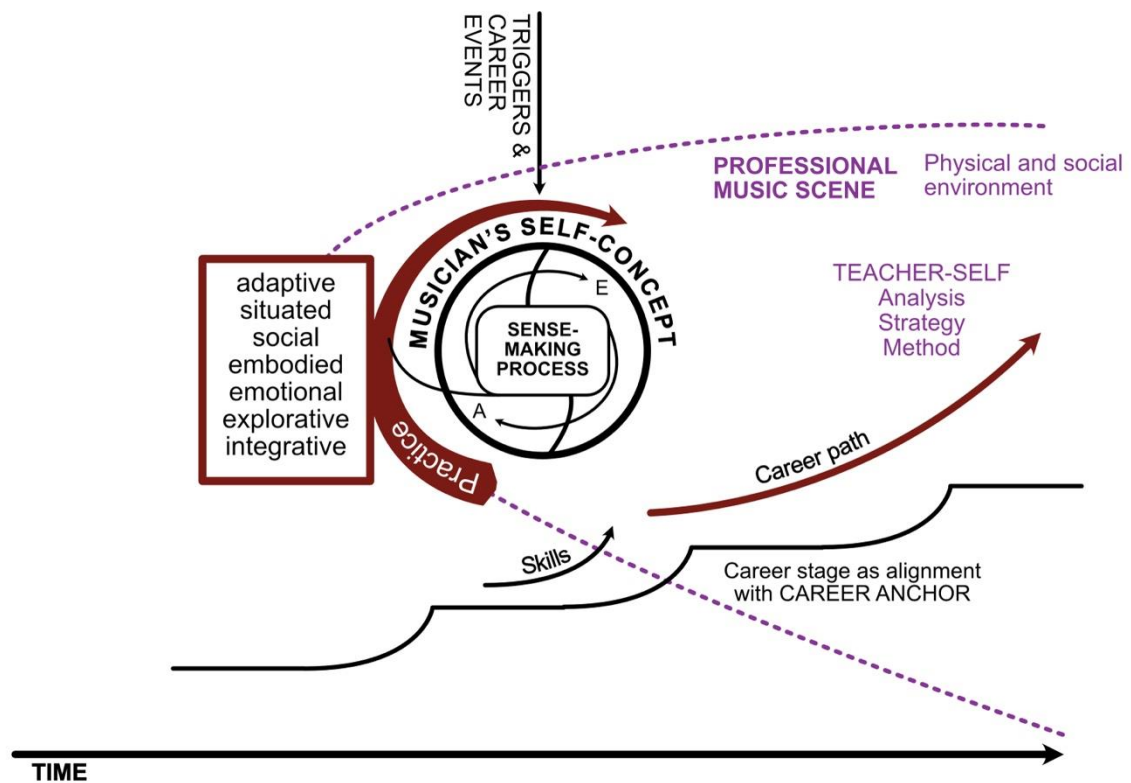


Figure 6: Step 6. Practice as sense-making and core of the adaptive musical career.

In short, practice as musical sense-making is adaptive, situated, social, embodied, emotional, explorative, and integrative. While this not an exhaustive list, the above description captures seven central characteristics. Most importantly, there is a continuity between the sensorimotor activity of the practice session, Jenny's history of interaction with her instrument, her collaboration with other musicians, and her artistic curiosity. In extension, these are the core elements shaping her adaptive musical career.

Jenny's Future

Coming home from the tour, Jenny has a stronger confidence in herself as a musician. As the band's leader, Harry strives to make everyone do their very best by providing musical and social space. The former guitar player returns and although grateful to Jenny, Harry will not be able invite her back for the next tour. Drawing upon

her new experiences, Jenny is happy to work with her own band. They record a debut album and gain recognition in the local press.

A decade later, Jenny is an established musician and an innovative guitar player, known for collaborations with musicians from a variety of backgrounds. She is invited as guest teacher during tours. Through these meetings, she becomes aware of structural gender inequalities in the jazz world. Although she has been through a fair number of frustrating episodes, she has not thought about these as part of a bigger picture. The stories told to her by younger colleagues affects her and eventually these social matters become her main focus of attention. While cultivating her understanding of these issues, she realizes that she has a role to play. Although less dramatic than during her student years, she gravitates towards another career anchor: *dedication to a cause*.

Discussion

FAMC is situated within the tension between HME institutions' differing responses to career development. While entrepreneurial and society-oriented approaches share concerns, they rest on distinct rationales. This section describes career development and practice as one joint process of sense-making and suggest how FAMC can be used in HME education.

A Sense-Making Continuity

Courses on entrepreneurship can be based upon general business-oriented models of skill development (e.g., Hayashi et al. 2024) transferred to a musical context. Entrepreneurial strategies, when viewed as tools for economic sustainability, do not necessarily challenge the notion of music as an autonomous art. They can be seen as practical matters which musicians have historically navigated (Scherer 2006; Weber 2004). In other words, entrepreneurialism is aligned with the “commodifying tendencies” (van der Schyff 2015, 2) in Western perspectives of music, and sees music as “an experience good” (Nino Contreras 2022, 243). An entrepreneurial career identity (Prokop and Reitsamer 2024) can be combined with a separate musical identity.

Entrepreneurial ideas are also accessible and relatable to anyone in a Western society. In contrast, society-oriented approaches emphasising student-centred teaching,

societal needs, student autonomy, collaboration, and critical reflection, may face more substantial institutional resistance (Duffy 2013). Such approaches may redefine the values of music and build upon students to “understand these values and their professional responsibilities in relation to both the past historical trajectories that constitute the practices currently taken for granted [...] and future alternatives” (Westerlund and Karttunen 2024, 215).

Career development and musical practice can be understood as sense-making processes on their own terms, but FAMC holds them as one process, ascribing a central role to the practice session. In this view, the practice session is a space where a musician adapts to triggers and career events, engaging in continuous identity work to uphold or restore a state of dynamic equilibrium (Sugiyama et al. 2024). The identity work accumulates over time and may result in a renegotiation of identity, as illustrated in Jenny’s case. What happens in the practice session inevitably stands in relation to issues of both musical identity and career development. Two examples of such relationships are (i) the role of environment exploration and (ii) social dynamics.

(i) Adaptive and enactive perspectives both emphasise the environment’s role. Adaptive career theory primarily focuses on social networks and opportunities for professional development, while enactive theory holds the physical environment as integral to cognitive processes (Schiavio and van der Schyff 2024). The architecture of a physical space, such as an HME institution, affects the structure of activities and is vital, not only in terms of acoustics and equipment, but also for social interaction (Small 1998).

(ii) Practice is inherently social. This means that individual practice is not conducted in a social vacuum but is influenced by interpersonal dynamics (Wenger 1998). Practice is directed to social settings, being rehearsals, performances, jam sessions, or dance evenings. Even the most abstract technical exercises develop skills which are means to participation in such events. Furthermore, musical practice need not be an individual activity. Some skills—such as rhythmic, improvisational and communicative aspects of music making—are developed together with others due to their interactional character.

Widening the notions of environmental exploration and social dynamics, from the situated perspective of a certain event to a history of interaction, creates a continuity between the practice session and the career path. Here, entrepreneurial skills are framed as one aspect of adaptability and a subcategory of emerging musicianship. Consequently, educational content about entrepreneurial skills benefits from explicit connection to practice, musical identity, and artistic imagination.

Applying FAMC

FAMC was developed in preparation of two workshops held at Malmö Academy of Music (MAM) in autumn 2024 with students from the performance program. The two groups consisted of Bachelor and Master students respectively. The workshops aimed to expand students' views on musical careers and offer tools to explore them. Reflecting upon the three aspects of self-concept (ability, motivation, value), and trying to identify with the career anchors, encouraged the students to articulate ideas about musical identity and their vision of working life, making implicit ideas more concrete. Each step of the framework led to further discussions, drawing upon the theoretical backdrop presented and the students' experiences, ideas and opinions. Such discussions may downplay the competitive, individualistic elements of the educational milieu and contribute to creating an atmosphere that promotes collaborative initiatives and non-linear thinking about one's own musical path.

FAMC implies that students receive guidance about practice. It is expected that students within HME spend a large part of their time practicing, although they are often left without proper guidance (Evans and Bonneville-Roussy, 2016). In the case of MAM, the workshops were held during a period when the students worked on a three-week autoethnographic assignment in which they followed their own practice routine. They were informed about research on musical practice, giving them a broad perspective of what practice can be, and theoretical principles put forth by researchers. The autoethnographic assignment was intended to ignite metacognitive reflection and inspire the development of an adaptive stance towards practice. Whereas the quantity and role of practice are prone to change as a musician transitions from HME to

professional musicianship (Pecen et al. 2018), the adaptive stance can be a constant feature as the practice session functions as musical and personal recalibration.

This idea is illustrated by Alexander Ishov (2024), flutist and artistic researcher. He states that the practice session for him is a “space that is truly mine, in which I get to decide what to focus my attention on. Holding that space is sometimes difficult amidst a busy performance schedule, but this centering time is what grounds my approach to repertoire. I am interested in defining the space of entanglement between me, my instrument, the music, and my collaborators. In doing so, I hope to better understand the processes mediating the relationships I am involved in, making me a more mindful flutist and collaborator” (Ishov 2024,17). Ishov’s (2024) words nicely captures the idea about practice as a sense-making process constituting the core of FAMC.

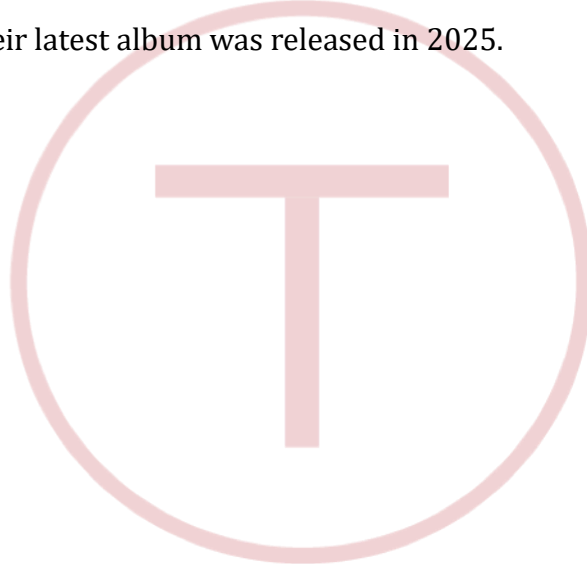
Concluding Remarks

I have proposed a framework that downplays the role of entrepreneurialism as the solution to issues of career development and employability. The presented ideas align with, and build upon, a wide repertoire of philosophies that challenge the aesthetics rationale, such as *praxis* (Regelski 2016) and *musicking* (Small 1998). Some authors emphasize other forms of virtuosities (MacDonald and Saarikallio 2024; Regelski 2016) and acknowledge multiple musical qualities (Gaunt et al. 2021) that challenge the traditional stakes within HME. Similar tensions exist between different attitudes towards critical reflective practices (Georgii-Hemming et al. 2020).

There are several possible paths forward. Key questions include how studio teachers integrate a skill development with fostering adaptability. One approach may be collaborative practices that combine technical improvement with social interaction. Furthermore, exploration of practice as a sense-making process is needed, drawing upon research on practice and sensorimotor learning.

About the Author

Dr. Markus Tullberg is a senior lecturer in Music education at Malmö Academy of Music, Lund University, Sweden. His research interests include embodied and extended cognitive perspectives on music making, with a particular focus on the relationship and interaction between musician and instrument. He currently runs a research project titled Practice-Lab Project, which explores the role of instrumental practice and skill acquisition within higher music education. He has also published within the field of traditional music and is currently editing an upcoming interdisciplinary anthology on Swedish folk music together with prof. Eva Sæther. As a musician, he has been pioneering the revitalization of the wooden transverse flute within Swedish folk music, primarily through his long-standing collaboration with fellow flute player Andreas Ralsgård. *Dialogue*, their latest album was released in 2025.



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¹ In this text, *practice*, refers to activities undertaken in order to develop musical skills and/or learn new repertoire.

² Moir et al. (2025) refer here to the tendency within HME to imitate jargon and adopt ideas from the commercial music industry.

³ In the present article, *environment* refers to both the social dynamics of the professional field (Kenny 2017; Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) and to the physical settings of the practice.

⁴ FAMC proposes a way for music students to envision their future working lives beyond the constraints of entrepreneurship, drawing on the work of Schein (1996). In line with Schein's terminology, the article frequently uses the word "career" and expressions such as "entrepreneurial creativity". I am aware that this terminology overlaps with discourses of employability and entrepreneurship—precisely the frameworks that FAMC aims to decenter. However, as discussed above, Schein's work focuses on the internal rather than the external career. Identifying one's career anchor offers a means of navigating working life guided by personal values other than market logics. I have chosen to keep Schein's original terminology.

