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Female conservatoire students' voices regarding futures in the male-dominated world of western classical music: the communicative or controlled mirroring pianist body?

Cecilia Ferm Almqvist^a and Carl Holmgren^b

^aMusic Education, Södertörn University, Huddinge, Sweden; ^bMusic Education, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Previous research has reported a multitude of problems related to gender equality in higher music education and the professional field of Western classical music over the last decades. This study aimed to understand female conservatory piano students' experiences of being and becoming musicians. Associative interviews with six students from three different European countries told their stories of studying the piano and their views of their futures as pianists and musicians in the male-dominated world of Western classical music. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed in a hermeneutical narrative manner using Frank's theory of bodily voices. The findings show how these students are situated towards and through conservatory studies, either cultivated towards control and body-relatedness or desire and other-relatedness, which seem to influence their views of possible futures. Finally, we offer suggestions for how conservatory education could enable and support students in responsibly developing their own musical futures.

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Introduction and previous research

Gender inequality in music education and the professional field is a pervasive issue that exists, to varying degrees, across different continents and genres (see, e.g. Canham et al. 2022; Ferm Almqvist and Hentschel 2019; Onsrud, Blix, and Vestad 2021; Goh et al. 2024). These problems are part of a larger structural issue with inequalities stretching from preparatory education, admission, teaching, and professional futures. Although proposals and actions have been taken to rectify this, there still is much left to do to achieve gender-neutral participation in creative higher education and professional practice (e.g. Brüsstle et al. 2024; Comunian et al. 2023; Werner 2022).

When it comes to gender and equality in higher music education (henceforth HME) and the professional field of Western classical music (henceforth WCM) previous research has reported a multitude of problems over the last decades, such as the underrepresentation of females in curricula (Borgström Källén and Ferm Almqvist 2024; Citron 1993; McClary 1991), and a the historically low representation of female composers in concert programming (Di Laccio and Hardman 2024; Hope 2022; Macarthur 2014), which has seen a slight increase, at least from a US perspective (Baer 2024). Although student gender distribution is approximately equal, female teachers in

CONTACT Cecilia Ferm Almqvist  cecilia.ferm.almqvist@sh.se  School of Teacher Education, Department of Education, Södertörn University, Alfred Nobels allé 7, Huddinge 141 89, Sweden

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HME are significantly underrepresented, with only about 30% in the UK (McClure, Kokot, and Scharff 2014), and 23% in Germany (Scharff 2017, 55). Furthermore, an ongoing study found that a third of the piano teachers in WCM at three European HME institutions were female, despite an equal gender split between students (Ferm Almqvist and Werner 2023).

The valuing of genres and career paths in WCM also ties genre to gender, reinforcing existing gender inequalities (Scharff 2017). Hence, there appears to have been quite little actual change in the practices of HME in preparing students of all genders and sexes for equal professional opportunities. This is highlighted in the report *Misogyny in Music* (House of Commons 2024), which, in line with Comunian et al. (2023), states that despite improvements in gender diversity within HME, strong connections between gender and specific instruments and genres seem to be maintained. Specifically, the educational and professional world for pianists in WCM is reported to be white-male-dominated (Ramstedt 2019). Scharff's (2017) analyses indicate that female musicians struggle to promote their work in ways that affirm, rather than threaten, their positioning as artists. She further underlines that self-promotion practices may challenge pianists' gendered identities, as they involve modes of behaviour cast as unfeminine. In sum, these inequalities seem to limit female students' possibilities to develop as musicians and achieve successful careers. Therefore, it seems crucial to further investigate female pianists' experiences of HME.

Practices in higher education of WCM have been reported as characterised by and reproduced through competition, hierarchy, and exclusion (Bull 2019), and masculinity has been found integral to the privileged position of the teacher as master (Borgström Källén and Ferm Almqvist 2024; Crowston 2008; Mellström 2002). A study on students' learning approaches identified gender stereotypical attitudes, noting that 'female students demonstrated generally compliant behaviour' (Zhukov 2007, 125). Additionally, female students in WCM have expressed being treated differently than their male classmates (Caizley 2023). Valenzuela, Codina, and Pestana (2020) found that female piano students showed higher amotivation and lower perceived motivation and competence compared to male students. Also, it has been stated that the 'recycling wheel' of students who become teachers and teach as their masters did conserves unequal gender roles (Blix and Ellefsen 2021). For example, inequalities in WCM manifest themselves in the valuing of genres and identities, where being a soloist is most highly valued (Bull and Scharff 2021). Previous research has also identified that instrumental teachers in HME present career trajectories through their examples and stories during lessons (Nielsen 1997). Therefore, how (the mostly male) teachers describe their careers and how multifaceted those are should affect students' possibilities to develop their own paths.

The 'businesslike intimacy' (Burwell 2012, 150) in one-to-one teaching in HME of WCM has been found to result in teacher-controlled interactions rather than negotiated ones (Gaunt 2011). Such lessons, described as 'secret gardens' (Burwell, Carey, and Bennet 2019; Hyry-Beihammer 2010), have been reported to centre on the 'relatively passive process of direct copying' (Burwell 2013, 280), which seems to limit transfer of learning (e.g., Holmgren 2022a), and restricts students' exploration of their own musical identities, interpretations, and career paths. Previous studies argue that having multiple teachers and collaborative teaching teams can address such shortcomings (Haddon 2011). Although the importance of providing opportunities for feedback, reflection, understanding, and meta-cognition in instrumental education has been emphasised (Hallam and Bautista 2012), students' opportunities for reflection during instrumental lessons in HME have been found to be limited (Gaunt 2008). This tendency has been attributed to restricted learning practices (Nerland 2007) and the reproductive core of the master – apprentice tradition (Bull 2019).

A shift from the master – apprentice model to a collaborative approach, where students and teachers reflect and solve problems together, has been suggested (Creech and Gaunt 2012; Holmgren 2022b). Examples of such a shift are collaborative practices where students learn with and from peers, positioning the teacher as a mentor rather than as a master (Gaunt et al. 2012). Reflecting on other students' contributions in such settings has been found to deepen learning and improve interaction and engagement among peers (Johansen and Nielsen 2019). A recent example of such

collaborative group lessons is the development and implementation of response-guided workshops on musical interpretation, where the students' envisioned a meaningful organisation of their studies as 'collaborative, dialogical, characterised by openness, humility, honesty, and mutual understanding, where musical interpretation is viewed as a complex, ongoing, open-ended process, allowing for multiple, incompatible views, breaking from the master -apprentice model and the current restrictive ideology' (Holmgren, 2022b, p. 574; see also discussion in Holmgren, 2023).

In a study on feedback in one-to-one lessons in HME, Sandberg-Jurström (2022) identified two overarching discourses: a controlling one, connected to the master – apprentice tradition, where students are supposed to follow instructions with limited self-reflection opportunities and a negotiating one, which emphasises possibilities and allows for students' extensive self-reflection (4 & 9). The study also identified four feedback approaches: those centring on calling for attention or recreation, connected to the controlling discourse, and those providing space for conversation or exploration, connected to the negotiating discourse. One example of the latter is Coutts' (2019) action research study, which focused on fostering and supporting self-direction, encouraging students to take ownership of their learning, and walking their own learning trajectories. In the study on her own practice, Coutts found that fostering self-direction is complex and requires strong student – teacher relationships to support students' self-efficacy and willingness to set aside expectations. To succeed, Coutts (2019) leant upon transformative pedagogical strategies, where collaborative discussions encouraged lesson structures that contributed to student ownership of learning.

Returning to the situation of pianists, the repertoire demanded and offered for study in HME is mainly composed by white, European men (Citron 1993; Werner and Ferm Almqvist 2024a). In addition, gender constructions play a role in maintaining musical canons and value systems (Citron 1993; Ramstedt 2019). Minors et al. (2017) ask for critical research, noting that '[u]n-surprisingly, the discourses that interrogate the white, male, middle-class hegemony are largely absent from higher music education' (466) (see also Comunian et al. 2023). Additionally, from both gender equality and health-promotive perspectives, it has repeatedly been argued that pianists with smaller hands are disadvantaged and more prone to pain and injury, potentially turning piano playing into a contest of hand span and speed (e.g. Boyle, Boyle, and Booker 2015).

Based on the above-presented studies, the curricular design and organisation of higher piano education, and teachers' expectations suggest a narrow conceptualisation of students' futures, mainly striving to educate professional soloists – a path that very few pursue – while neglecting accompaniment, chamber music, and teacher preparation (e.g. Bennet 2008, 2012). Thus, it seems important to investigate female piano students' experiences and, by that, contribute to a base for developing equal, flexible, and societally relevant HME for pianists in WCM. Therefore, this study aims to offer a deeper understanding of six female piano students' experiences of being and becoming musicians at three European conservatoires by analysing their stories in relation to Frank's (1995) theories of bodily voices.

Theory

To be able to understand female students' experiences of HME, a gender theory is needed. The view of sex and gender in this article leans on de Beauvoir's (2011) philosophy, which posits that repetitions and habits are stratified in the body as experiences in social settings, such as HME. She sees men and women as variations of human embodiment. So, according to de Beauvoir, otherness is not essential, but different starting points, allowing any human being to cope and be active, independent of sex. However, in each situation, some behaviours are expected, conserved, or reacted upon related to sex; these symbolised and layered actions are still preserved today, which make female experiences relevant to take part of. Through shedding light on patriarchal structures and how they have limited female actions, de Beauvoir views female biology as an obstacle to be surmounted rather than a fixed destiny and underlines possibilities. She further stresses the body as

a ‘situation’ rather than a ‘thing’, implying that biology cannot be understood outside of its social, economic, and psychological context. The body as a situation in a situation is thereby defined as a constant process of becoming (de Beauvoir 2011), implying that female piano students’ bodies are situated in HME settings. Young (2005) develops de Beauvoir’s thoughts and suggests that further theorising the socially constituted experience of women and men is necessary, which we have taken into account.

To view piano students and their teachers as lived bodies intertwined in relations in the music educational room could be a starting point for developing mindful bodily (music) educational relations (Ferm Almqvist 2020). The reasons for whether piano students are being limited or not when it comes to extending their bodies and running projects throughout their educational programmes and educational situations are related to the question about these bodies in relation to established patriarchal structures (Young 2005). In line with de Beauvoir and Young, Frank (1995) developed a theory of bodily voices with the aim to understand illness stories told through ill and wounded bodies. We adopt Frank’s approach to understand the piano students’ stories told through and about their bodies. One starting point in this theory is that stories are social. First, they are told to someone, and second, stories are created and told in a social context – storytellers have learnt ‘formal structures of narrative, conventional, metaphors and imagery, and standards of what is and is not appropriate to tell’ (3). Listening to piano students’ stories and telling our story about their journeys through music educational institutions becomes a part of constructing a map of and perspectives on their relations to the world, including other human beings. We use the theory to contribute to a deeper understanding of how the social context affects female piano students’ bodily stories about becoming musicians, not least when it comes to how they are shaped through social responses, which harmonises well with de Beauvoir’s and Young’s views of how females become women.

Throughout their education, the piano students as bodies are situated in varied musical contexts, where they handle the situation with and through their bodies. Frank (1995) suggests four general problems of embodiment: ‘control, body-relatedness, other-relatedness, and desire’ (29). According to Frank, each is a problem of action, and to be able to act, the body-self must ‘achieve some working resolution to each problem’ (29). Each problem of action is part of a continuum of responses, which is suitable as a lens for viewing pianists’ development towards and through conservatory studies. Frank has identified four ideal types of bodies based on the continuum of responses: ‘the disciplined body, the mirroring body, the dominating body, and the communicative body’ (29). The responses that contribute to the development of the different bodies are appointed as questions of control, body-relatedness, desire, and other-relatedness.

The question of control is formulated as: ‘Can I reliably predict how my body will function; can I control its functioning?’ (30). Educational situations can either maintain or challenge the control of one’s body, depending on what the teacher encourages, thereby influencing the students’ definitions of themselves. Control can be viewed along a continuum from predictability to contingency, where the latter concerns the body’s condition of being subject to uncontrollable forces. The social context expects piano students’ bodies to behave in specific ways. The question is what HME and the teacher ask for and encourage.

Additionally, the question of body-relatedness are: ‘Is my body the flesh that “I,” the cognitive, ethereal I, only happens to inhabit, or is whatever “I” am only to be found as my body? Do I have a body, or am I a body?’ (33). For pianists, the question could be rephrased as: ‘Is the piano something I have and am expected to play on in specific ways, or is the piano an extension of my body that I am and that I express myself with?’ Body-relatedness can be viewed along a continuum from associatedness to dissociatedness. In some music educational situations, the students are ‘at home’ in their bodies, including the piano, whereas in others, they view their bodies as playing the piano from the outside.

The question of other-relatedness is: ‘What is my relationship, as a body, to other persons who are also bodies? How does our shared corporeality affect who we are, not only to each other but

more specifically for each Other?’ (35). As an action, other-relatedness is about how shared conditions of being musical bodies constitute a ground for empathic relations. Frank (1995) labels the other-related body as a continuum from the dyadic – both individual and shared – body to the monadic body – existentially separated and alone. The monadic musical body exists without others, while the dyadic body exists for others. Again, what kind of body do educational responses encourage?

The questions of desire are: ‘What do I want, and how is this desire expressed for my body, with my body, and through my body?’ (37). Desire can be viewed along a continuum from lack to production. For piano students, this desire may relate to a lack of abilities, competencies and their possible futures connected to the creation of the same. The question is what HME encourages.

The disciplined body is defined by control and lack of desire, becoming monadic, or mirroring, as the self is disassociated from it. The mirroring body is created through consumption in relation to visions of other, personally ideal bodies; it is monadic, alone in a judging world, but it produces desires, with the self, associated with its body, on the surface. The domination body defines itself in force and is dyadic. Finally, the communicative body is an idealised type that contributes with ethical ideals for bodies, partly as it accepts its contingency. The communicative body-self is totally associated, intertwined, and exists for the other. We use the presented theories and concepts to interpret and deeper understand the female pianists’ experiences of being and becoming musicians.

Method

To fulfil the aim of the study, one of the authors performed associative interviews during spring 2021 and 2022 (Werner and Ferm Almqvist 2024b) as a part of a larger research project [*Conservatory Cultures*], exploring belonging in relation to gender and nation (Werner and Ferm Almqvist *Forthcoming*).¹ The selection of students was made by contact persons at each conservatory, resulting in a population of six piano students identifying as females, enabling a focus on female experiences and life stories. Hence, six female conservatoire students from three different European countries told their stories of choosing to play the piano, studying it at preparatory and conservatory levels, and describing how they viewed their futures as pianists and musicians. The interviews centred around the piano students’ and their teachers’ roles and responsibilities, educational goals, department atmosphere, relations to society, and visions about the future. The associative interviews were conducted in English, lasted 60–75 min in total, and were transcribed verbatim by a company aware of ethical guidelines and data storage rules.

Thereafter the transcribed interviews were analysed in an overarching hermeneutical narrative manner (Brockmeier and Meretoja 2014) through a four-stage process: first, one narrative closely aligned with the empirical material was created for each interview; second, these narratives were viewed through the lens of the concepts of desire, control, body-relatedness, and other-relatedness (Frank 1995) to deeper understand the bodily voices in the stories told; third, the complete empirical material was analysed again striving to deepening the understanding of the stories told in the interviews and retold by the researchers in the constructed narratives, leading to the identification of two main types of life stories centring on how controlled teaching (see Sandberg-Jurström 2022) appears to lead to body-related pianists, and not musicians vs how other-related teaching cultivates a desire for becoming a musician; and four, one composite narrative for each of these two categories were crafted based on the sentences in the individual narratives created in the first step. The material demanded a longer narrative for the controlled and mirroring body and allowed a shorter one for the communicative pianist body.

Throughout all stages of the hermeneutic narrative analysis (Brockmeier and Meretoja 2014), we remained open to the participants’ stories and their unique experiences. However, our understanding of their stories and our re-storying was informed and deepened through the perspectives provided by the bodily voice concepts stemming from Frank’s theory (1995). During the analysis, it became ever clearer that the students’ expressions of the central problematic aspects of their

education and how they could possibly be solved appeared to be similar to a remarkable degree. Thus, with the intention that the resulting narratives reflect the participants' experiences, viewed as a group (Todres 2007; Willis 2019) and the view that the stories told still 'belong [...] to the participants' (Byrne 2017, 43), we decided to consequently use 'we' and 'our' as personal pronouns. In other words, all the participants' voices contributed to both narratives. Although this practice may seem to limit the polyphony of the individual voices of the participants, we believe that it, in this case, leads to a stronger story representing the participants' experiences.

All participants in the research study '*Conservatory Cultures*' participated voluntarily, were informed about the aim of the research and that they were participating in research, and that they could discontinue their participation at any time and withdraw their consent to participate at any time. The interviewees were informed that the material of the study would be used in research publications. In the project, the Swedish <https://www.vr.se/english/analysis/reports/our-reports/2017-08-31-good-research-practice.html> and European ethical guidelines were followed. https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/fp7/89888/ethics-for-researchers_en.pdf

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Narratives

The analysis of the empirical material is presented in two narratives, each centring and illuminating either the controlled mirroring or the communicative pianist body (Frank 1995). These narratives will be presented and commented on below.

1. The controlled and mirroring pianist body – cultivated towards control and body-relatedness

As teenagers, we used to practise six, seven hours a day. We barely ate or had social connections, and this period at secondary school was brutal. Although we had other classes, we were already specialised in music. It felt quite cool, and we thought that we would definitely become concert pianists. One of our teachers had a really big character, always full of emotions, but was also quite strong in her opinions, and could be really hurtful. Now, we have realised that all practice, crying after lessons, working until midnight, not wanting to bring pieces in bad states to our teachers, and all the stressful examinations will lead to us teaching at a primary level of music school. Solo pianism is really not a thing, and most of the accompanists here are female. It is female-dominated. Females are also good with kids, so most also teach in music institutes.

Getting accepted to the academy of music is more difficult if you do not already know the professors like the local piano students do. In our piano lessons here, emotion is not so much a thing, but rather a striving for technical perfection and a focus on details. The teachers are strict and push us to do our best. We just go to our classes and are expected to take what the teacher gives. The lessons are only meant for playing, and we do not talk about any topics outside of what we are currently working on. The teachers distance themselves and keep it very clear that they are the teachers, and that we are their students. So, there is no room to talk about other things. We learn what classical music is about and how we should study it. The teachers always start with the bad things, and their approach is quite traditional and similar, which we, as future teachers, want to change. If we play something with a bad sound, the teachers say that we cannot get away with it. Sometimes, the comments are not as positive as they could be or are too personal, like 'Well, you don't really have the hand for playing the piano', which makes everything even rougher. It feels like they sometimes do not think we have that which will make us good pianists.

Although we like our male professors, it is a problem that they cannot always help us technically as their hands are much bigger than ours. One time we eventually dropped a piece by a female composer, as it was said not to be suitable for our hands. Furthermore, our male professors seem to aim

for a more masculine type of piano playing. We focus on learning repertoire and preparing for competitions, but the concurrence is harsh. The last time we recorded our solo pieces was two years ago. Then, we went over and over them, and finally, we could no longer play them as we wanted to. And we did not even know what was missing.

When we studied abroad, the piano departments were very collective, and the environment was much more supportive than here. The mentality here is closed and private, and all students are on their own, doing their stuff. Although we are not entirely alone, we spend much time at the piano, and do not really engage with other piano students. It is like we really do not want others to listen to us as it makes us feel judged. We have very few group lessons, and it is more up to the students to organise. But we do not always have enough courage to reach out to other teachers and perform at their class concerts.

One time, before an exam, we realised, 'Oh my god, there are six more students in the piano department at our age, but they are foreign students, and we do not even know them'. This is sad. At exams, we always feel that nobody wants to listen to us and playing for a few people is usually more difficult. We hate playing by heart because it makes us really anxious. The jury is not really interested in us, and they have already formed their opinions. It is like a sports event where we get our points and are sent out.

Our school has a holy, theatrical, museum-like atmosphere where we even speak quietly in the cafeteria. The doors are so well-made that we do not hear each other practising. As the piano department is a bit more ambitious than other departments, we have three diploma concerts. Every exam has a similar structure with specific requirements for the repertoire: there needs to be a piece by Bach, a classical piece, a romantic piece, et cetera. But although we love to play chamber music, we were not allowed to focus on it during our bachelor's studies.

The education tends to focus too narrowly on the art and forget to talk about what will happen after graduation. Most of the students are quite lost, then they graduate and are on their own. We wish there were more guidance and information about possible future career paths, and at least more advice during the first years of study. The programme does not really prepare for a freelance career. We must be very active outside of school and do a lot. If we just do the things at school, we do not get to know enough people, and one must know a lot of people to get concerts. Students' possibilities for giving concerts depend a lot on their teacher and their connections to concert organisers and other people. Everybody uses their teachers. Those who study with a powerful professor, who is high up in the food chain, are more likely to get more concerts, offers, and opportunities. It is not always fair, but we have seen this everywhere. The classical music business is small, and people know each other, and sometimes, it feels like only a few selected people get a chance. It seems like talent is not enough for a female student to get a career. As girls, it is important to be conscious of these things and be aware. But we think that the piano world perhaps has evolved a little bit more than the other instruments in this regard.

II. The communicative pianist body – cultivated towards other-relatedness and desire

Our teachers are really supportive and open and push us to think about what we want to say with the music. They leave enough room for us to express ourselves, and we can basically do what we want with the music. However, we have to form our thoughts and interpretational ideas ourselves, as the teachers want us to be active in our learning processes, not merely listen to their instructions. The environment at our school allows for different opinions, which is crucial for musical performance. The level is high, students are expected to do a lot, and it feels good to study here as the spirit in the department is so encouraging. The teachers focus on how we can become our own teachers. In group lessons, our teachers look forward to hearing our thoughts and ask, 'Okay, what did you think was good in your performance, and how could it be improved?' This way, we are evaluated and practice evaluating others outside of formal examinations and grading. We, students and teachers, are partners who collaborate, think, and discuss together. The teachers take our capacities as

the point of departure and put words on what they are doing and trying to achieve. There are many projects, master classes with teachers from around the world, and class lessons every week that we can attend. All students are always invited to listen, take notes, and share their experiences. Chamber music is also really important here. Through these projects, we students have gotten to know each other and have acquaintances from all over the world.

After our exams, the professors give a lot of feedback, and these sessions are very constructive and nice. They help us improve, take the next step, and reach another level. We also get much information about and discuss our future career paths.

Our teachers always have time for us, and one time, they asked if we would like to go and have tea or coffee outside of school. So, we went out and talked about music, but also about life and inspiration, for maybe two hours, and it was so inspiring! We prefer if teachers and students have a closer relationship, like talking about what we plan to do in the future or what else we are doing in our studies. In the future, we really want to give this opportunity to our own students, as it is so important.

We still have very good contact with our previous professors, who were so supportive. We can call them, and if they have time, they will gladly listen to our playing and give us a lesson, although we are not officially their students now.

Interpretation of the narratives

The aim of the study presented in this article was to offer a deeper understanding of six female piano students' experiences of being and becoming musicians at three European conservatoires. Based on our analysis using Franck's theories of bodily voices, we assert that the domination body did not appear in the female pianists' stories. The students' interpretations of their teachers' responses, which encouraged monadic relations and lacked focus on developing their desires, did not result in dyadic pianist bodies.

The disciplined mirroring body dominated the empirical material, as illustrated in the first narrative. This body is defined by control and loss of desire. The teachers' responses appear aimed at controlling the piano students' bodies rather than encouraging their personal desires. Consequently, students are cultivated towards self-regimentation; by that, they become scared of losing control over their bodies and artistic intentions. They get used to asking for predictability and seek to compensate for contingencies not accepted by their teachers or the tradition. By that, the disciplined pianist's body becomes monadic, as their education contributes to disassociation from it. In addition, mirroring is an un-reflected part of master – apprentice approaches to teaching, where teachers are viewed as ideal musical bodies. This perspective perpetuates the expectation for students to emulate their teachers, including conserving gender roles regarding (the valuing of) potential career paths. Since piano education primarily occurs in private meetings between master and student, the pianist's body becomes monadic, and the student's self only superficially associated with their body. However, by being afforded other experiences, for example, while abroad, the students got a broader perspective on their own educational culture's negative and positive aspects. Although unable to free themselves, the students want to participate in breaking the recycling wheel of such education, intending to give their future students different experiences – more relational ('We prefer if teachers and students have a closer relationship, like talking about what we plan to do in the future or what else we are doing in our studies. In the future, we really want to give this opportunity to our own students, as it is so important.'). less traditional and negatively focused ('The teachers always start with the bad things, and their approach is quite traditional and similar, which we, as future teachers, want to change.') – and possibilities that open other ways of existing in relation to their instrument, audiences, and themselves.

The second narrative highlights the development of the communicative body, which is cultivated towards other-relatedness and desire, although to a limited extent. The teachers' collaborative and relational teaching methods, along with the educational organisation, encourage the pianist bodies

to explore music in social contexts, fostering association and intertwinement that contributes to their learning and artistic development. The students' experiences of closer, higher-quality relationships with professors and peers, seem to have made them feel seen, safe, and valuable, not only as pianists but also as persons. These experiences appear vital as they want to allow similar opportunities for their future students. It is clear, though, that 'free' choices remain constrained by non-negotiable and taken-for-granted traditional frames, such as repertoire selection, which seems to hinder students from learning about and exploring a broader spectrum of works by female, non-Western, and lesser-known composers. The piano is seen as an extension of the body, fully used in communication, accepting contingency, and existing for others. The communicative pianist body shares its musical learning and story with other students and audiences, thus becoming the musical bodily message itself.

Discussion

This article aimed to offer a deeper understanding of female piano students' experiences of being and becoming musicians. We sought to identify aspects that seemed important for developing a relevant HME regionalised to the practices of higher piano education necessary to cultivate flexible and dynamic, pianists equipped to handle professional futures beyond gender constraints.

The findings show that the female pianists, like instrumentalists in general (e.g. Gaunt 2008, 2011), are mostly disciplined towards and through conservatory studies, by traditions, expectations related to their sex (de Beauvoir 2011; Young 2005), teachers' responses (Holmgren 2022a, 2022b), and self-conceptions, all of which clearly influence their views of possible futures. Consistent with previous research, the second narrative underscores the importance of other-relatedness in developing musician skills in reflected ways in different social settings towards a flexible future (Creech and Gaunt 2012). Also, developing self-efficacy and agency, becoming able to make choices and motivate them, are important given that breaking the recycling wheel of male-dominated piano musician practice demands such training. As Coutts (2019) and Holmgren (2022a, 2022b) underline, developing self-regulation, an essential part of a dynamic and flexible musician's competence, demands a relationship between teacher and student that encourages other-relatedness in dyadic directions. Such a relationship, encouraging other-relatedness, should not be viewed as similar to a traditionally female-coded approach (de Beauvoir 2011), i.e. caring and idealistic, which is present in the first narrative ('Females are also good with kids, so most also teach in music institutes.'). but as a flexible, responsive, and responsible teacher role.

As indicated in the first narrative, responses and relationships where teachers control students, in line with what Sandberg-Jurström (2022) described as a feedback approach connected to 'the controlling discourse', seemed to restrict the students' possibilities for developing their desire for playing the piano, and afford less power to explore their artistry autonomously and find their own unique artistic voice. However, instead of banning teachers' calls for imitation, we suggest transforming and reframing them more as calls to action, where students are invited to engage in collaborative artistic experimentation in line with a creative laboratory (see, e.g. Holmgren 2022a, 2022b).

We believe that it is vital for (female) piano students to meet several role models (see, e.g. Haddon 2011), to find their own way of becoming musicians with the piano as an extension of their bodies. To make such varied meetings possible, the current situation, where most piano teachers in HME are white and male, must be challenged. Hence, a more heterogenous group of humans should represent piano teachers in future HME. Furthermore, teachers, regardless of sex and gender, have to become aware of *whom* they encourage to develop *what* kinds of skills, and *how* they communicate it both verbally ('Well, you don't really have the hand for playing the piano') and non-verbally, and critically examine their assumptions regarding the prerequisites for students to take part in competitions or gigs, which does not seem to be the case according to our findings ('It seems like talent is not enough for a female student to get a career.'). (see also discussion of

sexual harassment in Goh et al. 2024). Overall, it seems essential to develop an increased gender awareness among piano teachers in HME. In addition, the implications based on findings in this study could also be relevant in addressing inequalities in the music industry and HME internationally (Brüsstle et al. 2024; Canham et al. 2022; Comunian et al. 2023; Ferm Almqvist and Werner 2024; Goh et al. 2024; Onsrud, Blix, and Vestad 2021; Werner 2022).

We recognise the risk that our findings largely reproduce previously identified dichotomies and stereotypes, which could be viewed as participating in the reproducing wheel. Nonetheless, we believe that the findings, based on the female piano students' experiences, is a story worth telling. Therefore, we kindly remind the reader that the findings reflect our analysis of the participants' experiences, not what the world should be like.

Lastly, the future that we suggest that HME should strive for is an education where students are neither fully disciplined nor left on their own, but are cultivated towards multifaceted and robust professional futures.

Note

1. The three chosen conservatoires could be described as follows: Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre is situated in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia where music education has been influenced by Russian, German, Finnish and Scandinavian traditions. The Sibelius Academy has since 2013 been part of the University of the Arts in Helsinki. In Finland classical music training has been highly valued, but the conservatoire tradition has been changed by neoliberal interests entering the university education as well as active pursuit of policies for equality implemented by political reforms. The Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music was founded by Franz Liszt, and hands out the Béla Bartók violin competition prize. Classical music is a nurtured national symbol in Hungary receiving increased funding from the current regime, with Bartók's catalogue, and its inspiration from Hungarian folk music, as an example of how classical music is at the heart of Hungarian ideas of a nation: and influenced by ideas about European folk culture (Werner and Ferm Almqvist [Forthcoming](#)).

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Notes on contributors

Cecilia Ferm Almqvist, a professor in Education and Music education at the School of teacher education, Södertörn University, Sweden, specialises in equality, inclusion, and aesthetic communication in educational situations. She holds a PhD in music education from the Luleå University of Technology, Sweden, 2004. Ferm Almqvist has published her work in several arts and music educational journals and presented continually at international conferences. Currently she is vice chair for the International Society for Philosophy of Music Education and scientific leader for practice-based research and research education for teachers as a visiting professor at Gothenburg University.

Carl Holmgren, an associate professor in Music Education at the Department of Creative Studies, Umeå University, Sweden, specialises in the teaching and learning of musical interpretation in higher music education and the Swedish upper secondary arts program. He holds a PhD in Music Education and a master's degree in music and education in Music from the Luleå University of Technology, Sweden. Holmgren serves as co-editor of the Swedish Journal of Music Research and has published in European and Nordic journals. He has also presented his work at numerous Swedish, Nordic, and international conferences.

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