Musicians' work preferences: teaching or playing?

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# **Introduction**

In the economic disciplines, the word 'interaction' immediately recalls the concept of strategic relationships among self-interested economic agents. Beside rational self-interested interactions, there are ways of entering into relationships that are based on a wider spectrum of motivations (such as empathy, curiosity, habit, reciprocity, care), which economists have tried to incorporate into so-called 'behavioural' analyses. Also, there are relationships of a coercive nature, such as those established between the state and the community to avoid free riding in the financing of public expenditure. Finally, participation in a social network may require the acceptance of a system of tacit rules among group members, which may radically alter the freedoms that individuals enjoy within and outside the group, by enabling and constraining participants through different rules combinations.

Starting from these premises and from the intrinsic value of doing music understood as a merit good that may be exchanged on the market, the aim of this work is to analyse with economic methodology the interactions that the teachers of the Trentino Music Schools (TMS) have established on the one hand with the Province of Trento with respect to their teaching activities, and on the other hand with the organizers of cultural events with respect to their artistic activity. In doing this, we assess the contribution that the local institutional context and the cooperative nature of the schools have made to their professional and human development in terms of improved economic stability and professional growth. The research is based on a survey that allowed to collect 141 questionnaires filled in by the teachers of the TMS. The questionnaire encompassed five sections: employment conditions, teaching activities, artistic activity, participation in the organizational aspects of the school, and networking activities.

Based on a preliminary descriptive statistical analysis, the research proposes an evaluation of musicians’ satisfaction for their teaching activities, as well as of their professional vitality, following an *ad hoc* evaluation scheme elaborated by merging previous authors’ contributions (Sacchetti & Borzaga, 2021). The analysis encompasses musicians’ teaching and professional performances, the economic characteristics of the production processes in which they participate (the total cost model), the interaction between social and individual motives, and the resulting level of vitality and satisfaction. The “performance pitfalls” observed in the quantitative analysis are considered as starting points for more in-depth analyses of the 'conducts' that may have determined the observed results.

# **2. Problematising the institutional context**

The policy choice to coordinate production resources through a combination of public and private nonprofit partnership was formalized in 1987, when the Autonomous Province of Trento (PAT) established a local educational system and a register for TMS, which organizations that met the regulator’s requirements in terms of reporting and transparency rules, and agreed to abide to shared educational standards could join. The aim was twofold. On the one hand, PAT wanted to improve job stability for the many music teachers working in local associations, often without an employment contract, and on the other hand recognize the public value of music culture and fully support its development in both urban and rural areas. Under these conditions, PAT committed to funding the costs incurred, largely for staff. Currently this totals about 6 million euros per year for 301 musicians - of which 60% are males - and 37 admin staff in 13 schools, for the provision of music education. A full-time job requires 19 hours of teaching per week. In order to be co-funded by PAT, teaching activities need to be arranged according to guidelines (for instance defining the duration of a lesson, its frequency, the number of students participating in taught music groups). The policy maker's idea was one of distributive justice that guaranteed widespread access to a meritorious good. Being cooperatives (of teachers) or associations (of teachers and/or students), TMSs present themselves as private business organizations aimed at producing a meritorious service, they are nonprofit, and their management follows democratic principles. In other words, there is no proprietary system, and members' assemblies function on the "one head one vote" principle; members elect their governing bodies and approve budgets. The democratic principle governing the individual organizations is embedded in a public system context, in which the province acts as the main regulator and funder. This highlights the two souls of this system: the public one, of general direction and distribution of resources, and the cooperative one, that leverages the musicians' capacity to give themselves shared rules and organizational structures that enable to offer a more diversified service, which meets the needs of diversified users (e.g. in terms of age, localization, music preferences), and different from conventional music education. Thus, cooperation was not intended for the benefit of musicians alone, but also for the benefit of the students and the community.

Still, the system of incentives for schools is centered on the number of students and hours taught. This music system is hence entirely concerned with music culture production through education. An obvious limitation is that it misses out the artistic component of doing music and music culture creation, which can surface only through the actual engagement in artistic activities not only by students (for instance through end-of-year public performances) but also and mainly by their teachers, whose artistic engagement can feed their students’ passion and motivation as well as their fulfillment as artists. Both outcomes could contribute to improve the welfare of teachers, as well as of the collectivity with respect to the original PAT’s aims. From these considerations we derive our research focus on teachers’ welfare and assume that desired welfare level by musicians include a combination of teaching and artistic activity that enables them to achieve professional and personal fulfillment, as well as levels of income that are consistent with their needs and the overall cost of living.

**3. Contractual conditions and on-the-job fulfillment**

The survey questions on contractual conditions and income, as well as those on professional and personal fulfillment, enquire on musicians’ perceived levels of welfare. Firstly, we consider material welfare with respect to contractual conditions, pay and whether musicians regard job-related pay adequate to their needs and living costs. Consistent with the public aim of improving job stability for musicians, 85% of contracts are permanent, and regulated largely by an *ad hoc* collective contract. 45% of respondents are full-time workers. Interestingly, 33% of musicians work part-time but not by choice, as they prefer increasing their teaching hours, while 22% are part-time and happy with their current arrangement. Second, we look at musicians’ satisfaction for hygiene factors, working hours’ flexibility, pension scheme, and job stability. On a 1 to 7 scale, these factors score on average above 5, except for flexibility (4.66). This is not surprising to some extent, since the timing of teaching responds to collective standards.

Third, we consider monetary rewards. Full-time musicians have indicated 1175 Euros average salary, while part-time earn on average 1080 Euros. Those who undertake extra-school activities earn on average 100 Euros less than those who do not. On a 1 to 7 scale, satisfaction with net salary is below 4, although it is considered on average fair with respect to the school's financial sustainability and inter-personal comparison. Also, it is considered severely insufficient to satisfy personal and family needs, as well as inadequate with respect to living costs. Forth, if we look at salary with respect to changes in musicians’ motivation to teach, we observe that a higher monthly pay (those who spend more time in teaching) is associated with lower motivations. A possible explanation (which is also consistent with qualitative data from interviews undertaken parallel to the survey) is that musicians’ activities within the school get a boost from extra-school activities, namely artistic ones. Those who get away to play and produce, besides teaching, renew their motivation more effectively than those who refer strictly to the school’s environment.

Fifth, we observe the motivational drive underlying teaching, and designed items with reference to behavioral theory (Cassar & Maier, 2018). The initial choice to work as a music teacher, an average of musicians’ self-rating on a scale 1 to 7, is given by other-regarding motives ("Having the opportunity to teach and pass on my passion for music" 6.32, "Contributing to creating musical culture" 5.69), as well as by both immaterial and material self-regarding motives ("Professional fulfillment" 5.45; "Need for income and employment" 5.22), while salary (4.12), consistent with low average levels, scores below average (4.77). Interestingly, the cooperative organizational form does not represent a powerful drive for musicians to join the school (2.83), and neither does the expectation that the school can enhance their visibility as artists (3.42).

Last, we consider on-the-job satisfaction. The items used to study this dimension are adapted from self-actualization theory in organizational psychology (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and aim at exploring musicians’ satisfaction for the non-monetary aspects of their job, in particular relationality, personal fulfillment, creativity (average score 4.94). Satisfaction is mainly driven by the relationship with students (6.36), on-the-job autonomy (5.38), by the nature of activities, and by the creativity that teachers are able to express through them (5.13). It is held back by the scarcity of opportunities for professional growth and training (4.08), and the low artistic visibility offered by the school (4.15). Satisfaction with collaborations with colleagues is also below average (4.80). These results suggest that, with respect to teaching activities, the most important aspect of musicians’ wellbeing is given by non-monetary aspects, and in particular by the quality of students and by the perceived freedom, creativity and effectiveness of their teaching. Our analysis of the institutional setting suggests that the latter aspect depends on the degree of freedom allowed by PAT’s teaching standards and by each school’s approach to their implementation.

**4. The size of musicians’ artistic activity**

Even if the focus of the TMS system is teaching, independent artistic activity has continued to be present among musicians. From an analysis of 241 music teachers’ school and personal web pages (not all the 301 musicians are named in MS websites) and major online music platform (e.g. Youtube music, Spotify), we found that nearly half of the teachers (45%) are or have been active in record production, while over half of them (56%) are active in performing with bands, orchestras, or ensembles. This result is consistent with what emerges from survey data, indicating that music production and performance belong prevalently to the musician’s professional activity outside their music school (54% of musicians), while the others either do not engage (12%) or engage with artistic activities within the context of school-related performances or productions (34%). The demand for artistic activity, looking at the places where performances mostly take place, comes from festival organizers and municipalities, which in most cases co-fund schools together with PAT, and demand musicians some degree of engagement with the town as part of the TMS mission of disseminating music culture. Demand comes less often from clubs, pubs, hotels, and recreational places in general (This may be related with classical music being the prevailing music genre taught and played by teachers, 79%).

**5. The scope of interactions between being a teacher and an artist**

Musicians see the value of combining teaching and artistic activity (5.79). Consistently, they express their creativity through both ordinary teaching (5.21) and public performances (5.18) (while artistic activities related to composition and arrangement score low, 3.64).

Those who were expanding their artistic engagement (in pre-pandemic years) identify the reason for this growth in their personal attitudes and objectives (6.29), and to some extent to the cultural context and to the choices of the intermediaries demanding music performance (4.53). Very little credit is given to the synergies with the school’s activities (3.35) and even less to the contribution of fellow teachers (2.50). Those who reduced artistic engagement associate the contraction with the cultural context and the choices made by intermediaries (6.25), and with production choices in the music industry (5.00). Results indicate that musicians who have a strong personal drive and the capability to meet the industry’s requests can surface the waters, while others struggle.

We hence attempt an explanation of personal drivers and focus on what supports musicians’ effort in performance and production, enquiring on extrinsic drivers (expected economic reward 2.85; public recognition 4.88), intrinsic drivers (6.05), and creation of opportunities (5.09). The string of effort is pulled by the intrinsic pleasure that one experiences and by the potential for new opportunities, which positively correlate with the criteria that musicians apply to select their partners: their artistic quality, capacity to understand the artistic project and improve it. Oppositely, monetary rewards do not drive the artistic effort. This may indicate that either that monetary payoffs are not important to musicians or that they are not adequate to their performance level. We opt for the second explanation. And this reinforces the need to problematize the freedom that musicians have when choosing the time they allocate between being teachers and being artists. It is indicative that the subjective vitality of musicians, that is the energy they have when undertaking their school work, scores higher for those who focus on school activities only and have eliminated the trade-off between teaching and their own private artistic activity *tout-court*.

**6. Implications for economic theory**

Building on these observations, we suggest some implications for cultural economics theory. The artist's labor supply model proposed by Throsby (1994) encompasses the desire to pursue a particular artistic vocation and the need to earn a subsistence income. Throsby's model seems appropriate to represent the musicians’ allocative choice of working time between teaching and artistic activities. In fact, being difficult to afford the cost of living with a fluctuating and often low income such as that one coming from playing gigs and concerts, Trentino’s musicians devote part of their working time to teaching activities at TMSs, obtaining an additional and regular monetary income in return.

Second, as musicians receive *de facto* a fixed remuneration for their work, both in the case of teaching and concert activity, without anchoring their wages to their performances (number of students and participants at concerts) a self-interested musician would have no interest in accomplishing his or her job professionally. On the other hand, performance evaluation transfers on the musician the risk of the activity, both on the teaching and on the artistic side, without the latter receiving any compensation in return, as in the case of a mixed wage that is at least pegged to the number of students/spectators. Such unfair distribution of business risk may indirectly incentivize the musicians to participate in extracurricular activities in schools and in the organizational aspects of gigs/concerts to “embed” themselves in both systems of relationships and thus stabilize their working activities. As the time devoted to complementary networking activities must be deducted from the overall working time, when they become more time-consuming, musicians, in order to not evade their work-time balance, might be forced to specialize in teaching or concert activity, losing one of the two sources of income and “diluting” the remaining one over a higher number of hours.

Third, it is worth noting how such an eventuality may be either an involuntary institutional outcome (context matters) or a voluntarily outcome of self-selection processes. Assuming, for example, that TMS teachers tend to self-select by participating in the organization of school activities and that, similarly, concert performers tend to self-select by means of social networking activities. By increasing the duration of organizing activities beyond a certain threshold of engagement, or by increasing social networking activities to a certain threshold, the "insiders" of the two groups might deliberately marginalize musicians who are interested in adopting a mixed earning strategy. In this case, in fact, the participation in one system would make it impossible to participate in the other, and consequently to contemporarily achieve the composite performance (partly declared, partly tacit) required by the two labour systems. The result is that, even if theoretically feasible, the integration of the two types of activities (teaching and concerts) would in fact be unsustainable at least in the long term. This in turn would generate a polarization of musicians, as they would have to "choose" to become either only teachers or only concert performers (but would this be a choice?).

Fourth, the polarization of musicians' work activities could give rise to forms of extractivism, as horizontal relationships are replaced by vertical and hierarchical relationships between teachers and concert performers (insider-outsider dynamic). In the case of teachers, extractivism lies in having to distribute their hourly wages over a greater number of hours (teaching activities plus organizational activities), while in the case of concert performers, extractivism lies in the imbalance due to the artificial creation of an excess of supply and in the increase of opportunity costs, as both factors may lead to the compression of concert performers' remuneration. In both cases, the balance achieved is sub-optimal and further penalized by conducts that, far from being cooperative, may instead be hierarchical and designed to transfer risk from the incumbents to the potential entrants.

Finally, the efficiency of this dual system could be tested by investigating how teaching and concert-teaching activities are open to musicians outside the provincial context. Specifically, it would be interesting to comparatively assess the performance of Trentino musicians (concert-performers, teachers, and mixed roles) with respect to musicians operating outside PAT, but also to survey opinions on the quality and profitability of the teaching and concert activities of musicians who migrate temporarily or permanently to PAT.

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