

## Music conservatory assessment approaches.

# DISTRIBUTION AND NEGOTIATION OF VALUES

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### abstract

This article describes and analyzes assessment approaches in three conservatories and thus contributes to the study of how values are distributed and negotiated within higher education specialized in classical music in the Baltic Sea region and Central Europe. The relation between assessment and learning could be viewed from different perspectives. Assessment *of* learning can be seen as a checkpoint regarding whether specific knowledge has been internalized, assessment *for* learning implies that the chosen assessment method encourages the learning process, while assessment *as* learning can be seen as intertwined with and dominating the learning process. In this article we clarify possibilities for transformative assessment, as well as the risk for assessment as learning. What counts as important knowledge varies between and within the perspectives. To generate material to enable analysis of assessment approaches in the Baltic Sea region and Central Europe, 23 students and 22 professors/leaders within three conservatories were interviewed. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through content analysis by the two researchers individually and collaboratively. The results show three different approaches, namely the competition approach, the portfolio approach, and the response-based approach.

**KEYWORDS:** Assessment, higher music education, conservatory, learning, values.

Earlier research has stated that assessment practices in higher music education are pervaded by un-reflected actions to a considerable extent.<sup>1</sup> How these issues are handled in Eastern and Central Europe has not yet been investigated. Hence, this article constitutes an attempt to contribute with insights regarding different views and experiences of assessment practices within higher music education focusing on Western classical music within three higher music education institutions in Estonia, Finland, and Hungary.<sup>2</sup> One way to shed light on assessment in higher music education is to explore which values are distributed and negotiated within higher music education by examining experiences of and reflections upon how assessment is performed and what it concerns. In the current neo-liberal era, education is influenced by assessment both within and between institutions. From the outside, educational programs and institutions are compared and evaluated through measures of different kinds, within and between countries.<sup>3</sup> Internally, musical abilities and skills are continually assessed and values based on different kinds of competitions are distributed and negotiated. Research within this area has focused upon entrance tests,<sup>4</sup> examination criteria,<sup>5</sup> and alternative assessment forms such as peer assessment,<sup>6</sup> participatory assessment,<sup>7</sup> and self-assessment.<sup>8</sup> Within conservatories,<sup>9</sup> ranking interests and artistic competence interests meet pedagogical interests. How this is handled on personal, collegial, and institutional levels is dependent on, as well as influenced by, silent or outspoken values regarding teaching, learning and knowledge. Teaching and assessment approaches in conservatories are strongly steered by tradition,<sup>10</sup> and therefore hard to perceive,

let alone to change, even if there are agreements formulated between European countries.<sup>11</sup> Through making traditional ways of performing higher music education, including assessment practices, visible, the article will contribute a base for further reflection and discussion upon values within and between European conservatories. In this article we explore how such meetings are handled through what we call assessment approaches, which in turn say something about values of teaching, learning and musical knowledge.

The aim of the study is to describe and analyze assessment approaches in three European conservatories within the Baltic Sea region and Central Europe. We pose the following research questions:

- How do students and professors experience assessment as part of musicians' education?
- What values regarding teaching and learning emerged in the informants' descriptions of reflections on assessment practices?
- What values regarding musical knowledge emerged in the informants' descriptions of reflections on assessment practices?

## Assessment in higher music education

In 2001 Torrance and Pryor,<sup>12</sup> interested in the phenomenon assessment *of* learning, found out through a collaborative practice-based research project that divergent assessment – finding out what students knew or could do – was more powerful than convergent assessment – assessing whether the students possessed a defined element of knowledge –, as it stimulated further learning. Also, they discovered a split between task criteria and quality criteria, throwing light on the risk that task fulfillment can become more important than doing the task well. As they were also interested in assessment *for* learning, they stated that collegial collaboration is important to handle formative assessment in functional ways. If not, there is a great risk that an instrumentalist view may take over<sup>13</sup> and become open for a “testing regime”.<sup>14</sup> In such cases response is given as instruction in relation to task criteria. Even in higher education in general, such a linear way of assessing pre-formulated learning outcomes visualized the same risk.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, Torrance and Pryor proposed the term “transformative assessment” which included a double focus on task and quality criteria, recognizing criteria as contingent and contextual, acknowledging the importance of applying or transforming criteria to new situations and, finally, analyzing the use of assessment within a larger social framework. This development is not transferable to higher music education, concentrated on classical music, as there has been avoidance when it comes to defining learning outcomes and progress between courses.<sup>16</sup> Essential work has been done within AEC, the Association Européenne des

Conservatoires, Académies de Musique et Musikhochschulen,<sup>17</sup> a European association for higher musician education. Within AEC common goals for Europe have been discussed and formulated, but in many countries learning outcomes in line with the Bologna process have only been implemented recently in course plans and syllabuses.<sup>18</sup> Instead, assessment practices have been steered by traditions.<sup>19</sup>

Implementation of assessment *of* and *for* learning has been shown to be complicated, as noted above. If, for example, the balancing between task and quality criteria, or the challenge with inquiring response giving are not handled in a reflective way, there is a risk that the practice may lead to assessment *as* learning. For example, there may be a risk that the juridification of assessment, “criteria compliant based assessment”, based on obligations regarding clear criteria and transparent processes may replace possibilities to learn based on personal response.<sup>20</sup> Although formative assessment has been encouraged by a vision regarding how assessment can encourage learning, it has driven instrumentalism,<sup>21</sup> thus achieving the opposite effect, rather than encouraging learning of the intended knowledge. Accordingly, it is crucial to have an ongoing collegial discussion reflecting upon quality, equality, and instrumentalism;<sup>22</sup> values relevant for conservatory education. In this article we are therefore not interested in labeling the different approaches as assessment *of* or *for* learning, but in clarifying possibilities for transformative assessment, as well as the risk for assessment *as* learning.

The discussion of challenges and needs regarding formulation of assessment criteria in relation to music performances



has been lively in the last fifteen years.<sup>23</sup> Waagen<sup>24</sup> explored how implementation of new assessment guidelines influenced assessment of bachelor concerts. The examination involved external assessors who were obliged to use the newly formulated criteria when evaluating main instrument concerts among bachelor students. Using Sadler's<sup>25</sup> theory of qualitative assessment including the twin concepts of holistic and analytic assessment, she found that the criteria supported a transparent, argumentative, and trustworthy assessment practice. The criteria were also defined as valuable in the work entailed in giving a response to students, but this had to be contextualized, standard oriented and not used mechanically. It became clear in Waagen's study, however, that her participants valued conceptualizing musical knowledge as important for all involved, as common discussions and reflections are made possible, which hopefully contribute to qualitative learning processes that also invite students to be active. Sandberg-Jurström<sup>26</sup> explored meaning making feedback in one-to-one teaching situations in higher music education and discovered two contrasting discourses. The negotiating discourse emphasized reflection possibilities and offered space for self-reflection. The controlling discourse, on the other hand, restricted reflection and offered little or no opportunity for self-reflection. Four feedback approaches were revealed through a multi-modal analysis, two connected to the controlling discourse: centering on calling for attention *or* for re-recreation, and two connected to the negotiation discourse: for providing space for conversation *or* exploration. Hence, Sandberg-Jurström<sup>27</sup> states, the "discussions of how to enable professors to reflect critically on their own professor-student relationships and of how reflection opportunities can become part of staff development, building teamwork for student coaching instead of teaching in isolation"<sup>28</sup> must continue.

**THE PORTFOLIO** as a tool for transformative assessment has been rather well explored by researchers in recent years. For example, Bartleet et al.<sup>29</sup> found that educators promote portfolios as exam materials among conservatory students. The portfolios were expected to contain several types of documents showing the diversity of skills acquired by the students, as well as what they can do in addition to playing their instruments. Even different kinds of musicians' roles could be included.<sup>30</sup> Reflections on learning activities are often also expected to be part of the portfolio.<sup>31</sup> As Rowley et al.<sup>32</sup> point out, portfolios can encourage students' "ability to reimagine what their musical world could mean and how their own capabilities and creativity could be utilized is evident in their responses".<sup>33</sup> Hence, Rowley et al. continue, portfolios can make clear for students what capabilities they need in order to develop and manage a dynamic future: for example, business skills, social awareness, and creativity. Consequently, if portfolios are used in a reflective manner, they help students and professors to balance between task and quality cri-

teria, as well as contributing to transformative assessment. Used in un-reflected ways, however, there is a risk that they nurture instrumentalism and task fulfillment – assessment as learning.

## Method

To get access to conservatory leaders', professors', and students' experiences of assessment within higher music education, individual interviews were performed. During fall 2021 and spring 2022, 22 conservatory leaders/professors and 23 students, including six percussion students, four string, six voice, six piano students, and one student studying the flute, were interviewed. The students consisted of seven male and sixteen female instrumentalists. The interview guides were thematic and semi-structured and aimed to grasp aspects of conservatory culture. The themes included the background and goals of the participants, the atmosphere of the institution, teachers' and students' responsibilities and choices, repertoire and concerts, policy, internationalization, curricula, and connections to society. The interviews lasted for 60–75 minutes each and were recorded via the communication tool Zoom or by a voice recorder on site. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by a company. Information letters were sent out beforehand, the participants were also orally informed about ethical considerations and data manage-

ment plans, and informed consent was recorded. The interviewees knew that participation was confidential, and that they could choose to withdraw from the study, or withdraw parts of the interviews, at any time during the study without reprisals.<sup>34</sup>

The material was analyzed via qualitative content analysis, searching for significant factors that could describe different assessment approaches within the three conservatories, and by that unfold values regarding teaching,

learning and knowledge.<sup>35</sup> One of the researchers went through all the complete transcribed material and gathered everything that related to assessment activities in a shared document. The model for content analysis is defined as openly thematizing, in line with Braun and Clarke's, Maguire and Delahunt's, and not least Schreier's recommendations.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, the two researchers looked for assessment approaches and marked quotes in a shared document. This phase generated the competition approach and the portfolio approach, and a third approach, which later was labeled as the response-based approach. The analysis was further based on the manifest content, which was conducted individually by the two researchers, although followed by continual discussions. Before the actual coding and thematizing work started, within the three areas, each piece of material was thoroughly read through as a whole, aiming to create an overall understanding of the content, and to get a sense of similarities and differences.<sup>37</sup> Thereafter, various codes were created and applied to identified meaning entities represented by specific phrases, parts of sentences, and one or several sentences. Each code

**“IF PORTFOLIOS ARE USED IN A REFLECTIVE MANNER, THEY HELP STUDENTS AND PROFESSORS TO BALANCE BETWEEN TASK AND QUALITY CRITERIA.”**

consisted of one or several words that grasped and represented something significant and meaningful in the various text units. As the analytical process proceeded, the coded units were grouped in different tentative sub-themes. The codes generated were then grouped into tentative thematization drafts, which were repeatedly tested and revised based on the aim of the study and the empirical material in its totality.<sup>38</sup> Finally, the three main approaches were related to the material as a whole and validated.<sup>39</sup>

## Results

The content analysis resulted in three strong assessment approaches, namely the competition approach, the portfolio approach, and the response-based approach. The different approaches are not connected to single teachers, instrument contexts or countries, but can be found parallel or intertwined. In relation to each approach, values regarding teaching, learning and musical knowledge also came to the fore.

### Competition approach

The analysis revealed that most frequently cited examples talk about the competitive nature of assessment. This is partly due to the way assessment is performed. When teachers use differentiated assessment prerequisites a competitive atmosphere have been created. The analysis of expressed experiences shows that not only grades but also students' own goals and/or professors' expectations increase the competitive essence of assessment. Under the competition approach, three different competition perspectives were revealed, namely *competition with oneself*, *competition between students* and *competition between professors*.

### Competition with oneself

There are several ways in which competition is seen by respondents in connection with self-development, motivation, and self-regulation. Setting a task and challenging oneself is described as a powerful tool for learning. Students described it as setting a goal – “I’m going to sing with the highest mark in my bachelor’s exam” (voice student). This is the destination that helps to plan the practice, tolerate its routine, and carry through obstacles, according to the students. Reflections about one’s strengths and weaknesses help to plan further studies and manage fallbacks. “I know what I’m missing” (string student). They work hard to meet the goals they set for themselves. It was stated clearly that grades are not important when the students have a relevant image of their skills and resources. Hence, perspective about one’s own development and goal becomes gradually more important during the studies.

**COMPETING WITH YOURSELF** because of having set high expectations for yourself may cause disappointment about getting lower marks than expected or frustration about memory lapses in the exam, according to the interviewees. To handle fallbacks, survival strategies need to be developed. Such strategies include students developing an understanding of themselves, their capacity, musical skills, and knowledge. The view is expressed that everyday reflection about the students’ progress is inevitable.



Students’ self-awareness is visible in their responses describing possibilities to take responsibility for choosing repertoire. Deliberate reflection about the given topic is necessary because professors “tend to pick the famous, hard arias. It’s maybe not the place to do that” (voice student).

Students state that they find feedback a crucial tool to calibrate their progress and understanding of their musical abilities, but it was emphasized several times that it is “hard to get”. Usually, they get feedback from their own professor.

**Also, feedback is so hard to get. Because usually, they just flee after the exam to different parts of the house. And they may sometimes nod from afar and say: ‘Well done’. But that’s about it; if you don’t catch them yourself and ask specifically, ‘What do you think about my Mozart’, they won’t give you any feedback. You will get something from your teacher. Maybe he will even tell you what others thought. It really depends on the mood and how much I’m willing to ...** (piano student)

According to the interviewees, students must deal with both positive and negative results of assessment. They (students) usually manage (to improve their professionalism) by rehearsing, improving their technique and honing their self-expression through strengthening their mental status (and stability). It really demands great effort, but it is still manageable for the students in this study. Consequent work and effort will be rewarded and recognized by graduation, which in Hungary, for example, means a thoroughly prepared final concert – a great master recital, that one piano student expresses as a “lifetime experience for everyone”.

### Competition between students

Two conservatories, according to the material, use a traditional grading system that lays the ground for students to compare themselves to each other. Grade based assessment has a dual nature – awarding grades may arouse learners’ enthusiasm but can also work backwards and become an obstacle. Both sides were observed in the research material.

The first contest between the students takes place when entering higher level education. Competition is in the spotlight when candidates apply for student positions. The “jury” or “committee”, usually comprising 4–8 members, must judge entrance exams on-site. In one conservatory it is also possible to apply for a position using a video audition. Despite the range of

amplitude (0–25 or 1–5 or 1–20 points), competition for enrollment in all conservatories establishes foundations for competitive practices.

The exam is the most common form of assessment, which has many limitations, according to the interviewees. The conditions that some students must follow – no audience but a jury, given time limit and grading system – may have a restrictive impact on the performance. “Exam is not my own concert; I am part of the examination plan” was stated by one student who puts the spotlight on rather regulated repertoire as regards content and amount. This tendency was addressed by the students of those schools and/or curricula where the content of the exam is not chosen by the student. This limits the expression of a student’s own creativity to compile the program or include fellow performers, according to the analysis. Further, it suggests that where the conditions of the competition are over-regulated and identical for all students it is very difficult to present one’s own strengths. That might be possible if a broader choice was given when it comes to repertoire, musical formations, and the form of performance. Failing to do so restricts students’ opportunities to highlight and fully develop their own uniqueness, which should be crucial for coping in the labor market.

Some universities, according to the analysis, have developed exam assessment criteria of which every single criterion is expressed in percentages, giving a certain value of the final result. Two of the investigated conservatoires are on their way to developing a transparent assessment system, which was seen among the teacher participants as moving in the right direction.

**IN THE COMPETITION** approach the grades hold significant value. From an objective perspective it is believed that the criteria influence motivation but also give space for demotivation. If the assessing board uses only the highest grades of a 6-point scale, the assessment system loses its credibility.

**Yes. These are graded exams. And here it is from ... technically they say from zero to five, but I would say one to five system. Five is excellent, four is very good, three is decent, two is medium, not medium, it’s like alright. Even three I would already say that the teachers have not been that impressed. So, two is even worse than that. And one is a fail. So, if you get a one you fail the exam. (professor/leader)**

In some cases, the students state that they have an understanding that only the best grades are good enough and if they get lower ones, they feel that they have failed.

**[I got] Five. Five, but ... I mean, I think no-one ever got the worst one. I don’t know if it’s really “ever”, but it’s**

**not usual, I think. But in here everybody gets a good mark. In here, the five is the best. Okay, somebody sometimes gets a four, but three, never. So it’s not significant. (voice student)**

To manage the huge competitive pressure that students express that they feel, they pay attention to their mental health and work out survival strategies like focusing on their own development and stable conditions.

**So, for me, it was always the development in my own way that was important for me and not the others. Yes, that’s why I meant that actually I’m quite stable mentally but I still had to work a lot on these things to be able to deal with them on their own ways so it’s not about me. (piano student)**

The analysis showed the contradiction/conflict between students’ wish to experience being compared (only) to themselves i.e. assessed in the context of their own development instead of being compared to their peers (during the assessment process).

**So, the teachers compared others to them [outstanding talented student], instead of looking at our progress. [...] But they did not look at our progress. (voice student)**

Assessment using a competition approach already starts at the entrance exams and continues throughout all studies. Such an approach seems to leave little space for creativity and individual design of the students’ studies (repertoire, concerts etc.) and usually does not support enhancement of good relationships between students. Awarding marks and listing students by their achievement, which is the basis of the competitive approach, are essential, if used purposefully and with clear understanding of their strengths and weaknesses.

### Competition between professors

The competition approach is not only performed by students but also by professors among themselves, according to the interviewees. The analysis shows that they used their students’ performances in their own competitions. Several examples bring out tensions in students affected by professors. Interestingly, it was mainly expressed by voice students.

**Teachers [...] they have problems with each other and then they go through the students, and they somehow fight their own fight through a student. (voice student)**

Students talked quite a lot about how professors’ competition with each other influences them and their studies. They perceive the pressure to be the best to enforce their professors’ author-

## “ASSESSMENT USING A COMPETITION APPROACH ALREADY STARTS AT THE ENTRANCE EXAMS AND CONTINUES THROUGHOUT ALL STUDIES.”

ity. Furthermore, students experience professors favoring their own students and acknowledging them by giving higher grades, which conflicts with students' understanding of ethical principles. Aiming to earn more reliability and prove their own students' outstanding skills, the professors seem to prefer giving the students challenging and onerous repertoire, which may damage their voice apparatus. It was expressed as unhealthy behavior by two voice students.

The notion that a voice student "belongs" to the vocal professor is so rooted that changing professor would be equal to "social suicide" (voice student). If a student wants to do that, they must be "mentally really strong" because this act may influence their career for a long time.

**You will get destroyed in exams [...] there will be comments in your grades in exams. Not that the grade matter, but the feedback you will get will be personal. Not toward your singing, but toward your teacher who is now teaching you. It's the ego.** (voice student)

In the interviews, we found the issues of ethics expressed by both students and professors. For example, personal judgments made by one professor on students' outfit, appearance, and body during the discussion after the exam was brought up to question its relevance in supporting students' musical development. Similarly, one vocal student stated that the professor "was delighted when the other professor's students got a critical response", behavior which was seen as totally inappropriate by the student.

**IN TERMS OF** musical knowledge and its improvement, students expressed clearly that feedback is crucially important, but in cases where professors perceive themselves as competitors, getting feedback loses its purpose. A singing student puts it as follows:

**I could talk with the other teachers, but I always felt that there is no real meaning in talking about my singing with the other professional great singers or teachers because it was never about me. [...] Well, they got used to it. They do it. This is their play, that's how they play this game.** (voice student)

On the contrary, another voice student shares a supportive comment given by a jury member:

**'Congratulations, the exam was really good. And you have a natural understanding of voice that hasn't been ruined.' I thought that was really nice, because nobody really gives us any feedback besides our own teacher, and you never know if it... And that same teacher who wrote to me**

**is casting director at an opera house, and she offered me the role in the autumn.** (voice student)

The quote shows how personal well motivated response is functional. In conclusion, the competitive aspect of assessment is visible on all levels – to students, peers and professors, and if it is carried out with full awareness and taking responsibility, the competition approach can have an impact as motivator and enhance musical skills as well as the professional career. However, if competition is perceived as an impediment, it is difficult to see or explain its positive influence, although this could still become evident if students try to deal with the situation with careful consideration, using their self-management mechanisms/potential.

## Portfolio approach

The analysis showed that one way to approach assessment in conservatories, as described by the interviewees, was the portfolio approach. This approach encourages students to gather documentaries of different skills during their education. This way of viewing and handling their own learning processes and outcomes demands, according to the analysis, that students to a smaller or larger extent reflect upon what they learn, how they do it and make choices regarding how their learning processes and outcomes could be communicated. In one of the universities the portfolio was used explicitly according to one of the teachers: "I think they cannot play the actual exam concert until the portfolio is ready", while in others it seemed to be more of a tacit, implicit assessment practice. Three slightly different approaches became visible through the analysis, namely the traditional view of portfolio, the semi-open portfolio, and the open portfolio.

### Traditional view of portfolio

The traditional view of the portfolio that emerged through the analysis includes ready-made folders that the student should fill in. It could be about pre-decided musical styles, for example, Bach covers the request for polyphonic style, or epochs



that should be covered. A quote from a voice student exemplifies this:

My teacher is quite free, especially about the pieces I pick. Especially after the last exam. He said I'm ready to do a lot of base repertoires. Obviously not the biggest pieces, I still have much to develop. I still have places to develop, so maybe not rush the bigger pieces. Overall, I can say I would like to do this, and he would be ok with it. He'll say, "Let's look at it, let's check it, let's sing it." Then he might say, "Okay, maybe not, let's skip this for spring exam," or "Let's skip this for your master's exam." But he doesn't say, "No, you can't sing this," no, not at all. (*voice student*)

Apparently, the student perceive that the professor takes great responsibility when it comes to what pieces would suit the student to put into the portfolio at a particular moment. According to the student, singers at the same institution are asked to show that they can sing an aria, as well as participate in an opera. They learn different roles, and are expected to perform the different roles at the final exam.

Pianists should play something from Bach, as well as a Romantic piece and a Classical piece, according to the interviewees at one of the conservatories. At another, the demands differ slightly:

Of course, when there is for example an exam, like a program exam, then there is a certain type of structure. For example, there needs to be Baroque music, and there is the piece ... like a piano sonata from the Classic era, and what else is there? Oh, the modern piece, that mustn't be older than 50 years. And then of course the ... I think Chopin's Etudes are compulsory. And we can also choose one Romantic piece and then the ... what ...? Oh yeah, one Romantic piece that is kind of like a free choice. And I think ... Yes, so the program exam is

maybe the only one thing where the programs are a bit structured. But the piece itself, you can basically choose by yourself. (*piano student*)

The quote gives an example of the traditional view of portfolio that gives minimal space for students' own reflection and choices. A professor at the third university mentions almost the same demands when it comes to what to put in a portfolio, but specifies Beethoven, Shostakovich, and Rachmaninov. String students, especially violinists, seem to have even stricter demands when it comes to what should be included in the portfolio. According to students at one university, the exam has to have one Bach and one Paganini caprice and sonata, a virtuoso piece and then a movement of a concerto – Beethoven, Brahms or a national composer. In addition to that, one chamber music piece or a recital should be in the portfolio. It might also vary depending on which professor they are studying for: "I have two professors, and the other one is the freer" (string student), while percussion portfolios are more open. The different approaches between the instrumental departments are exemplified by a string student at another university.

They have to play one or two movements by Bach, they have to play a classical concerto. They have to play a virtuoso piece from the Romantic period, one from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and ... yeah. I think with piano it's also kind of similar, but it also depends on the professor. So the percussion department is especially flexible in this sense. (*percussion student*)

Even percussion portfolios can be more closed, however, according to the analysis, and here it is the variation of instruments that steer what should be put in the portfolio: for example timpani, marimba, mallets, and snare drum. At one university all percussion students are asked to play the same pieces, to make it easier for the assessors to value the students equally. It is considered important that the assessors know the pieces well to do a good job of evaluating, which illuminates the risk that traditional portfolios become examples of assessment *as learning*.

And I think, when everybody is playing the same stuff, it's so much easier to put everybody on the line. Who is actually doing the best job? So, I always select those pieces and have even used the same pieces if I know that the same people are not coming. But I have a few versions of it. And I think that it doesn't really matter what the pieces actually are, but for us, it has worked really well that everybody is playing the same stuff. (*professor/leader*)

Other pre-decided criteria that steer what could be put in the portfolio include how it



should be played in relation to musical quality, for example that a piano piece should be played in a fast tempo, as one student describes: “And the other Etudes that need to be also like a fast tempo”, or must be played by heart.

**I’m playing a toccata in the major. I’m having issues with playing it by heart. I’m really working hard towards it, but so far, I only have half of it memorized. But I have time. I have time.** (*piano student*)

The criteria for what should be put in the portfolio force the student to practice specific things, rather than reflecting upon why (s)he wants to show specific skills in relation to the coming profession for example. Another aspect that is exemplified as a “must” in the portfolio is to demand that students play pieces they don’t recognize, aiming to grasp how they approach, prepare, and interpret unknown music. In one of the universities the traditional portfolio approach is rather clearly expressed, including in what ways the professors and assessors are to be involved.

**Or like, you need to play ... in student concerts, ... you have to collect a portfolio, that you have performed these standard pieces. Or I mean, pieces of different nature.** (*professor/leader*)

The professor continues to explain that this is partly to evaluate that the students have learnt enough pieces of varied kinds, and partly to give feedback and discuss the portfolio with the student. Finally, they sign a document which is added to the portfolio. It becomes clear that the closed traditional portfolio is used as a tool to form the students, according to the interviewees, not seldom in the traditional master-apprentice way.

### Semi-open portfolio

The semi-open portfolio supplement the traditional one with different kinds of openness that invite the students’ own suggestions and choices. This openness is more common at master’s level than at bachelor level. Here, the professors are still steering and are more or less open for negotiations when it comes to how free the open possibilities are. The openness can take the form of choices within a specific area, or style.

**So this is a first thing, which sort of gives you direction, which stylistic period you are addressing in this time frame for instance. But everything else is really based on the student’s level of playing.** (*professor/leader*)

For a student it can be about choosing pieces for the portfolio freely but with the requirement to cover four different languages. The openness can also be framed by a specific expectation such as a solo concert which steers what the student chooses to

put in the portfolio. For example, it is possible to deepen your interest in one composer according to one of the students.

**Nowadays I really like to play a lot of Schumann. I don’t want to be the pianist that says that “This era is mine and I’m not playing anything else” or “This composer is mine and the others are not really accepted”. But nowadays, I find Schumann extremely interesting. And I’m also playing a lot of Ravel. I love those composers.** (*piano student*)

Another example of semi-open portfolio is a divided exam concert, which some of the interviewees described, where one part is steered by specific composers, styles, instruments or soloistic demands, and the other part is free for students’ own choices.

**Well, it’s a two-part exam. The first exam is that there are different genres, like Baroque and modern music basic repertoire. Like, different genres. And then, that’s the A level concert. Like basically what you would call a master concert? But then we have different master concerts, which is another A level, and then we have the master concert. Which is your artistic constellation of different**

**repertoires that you are free to choose. So, we have two concerts, which are both watched and given two numbers.** (*voice student*)

**Because I was thinking maybe I can include my partner as co-player, or do something like that. And he [the professor] said that usually it’s like 70/30 or 65/35% ... the bigger number is like your solo pieces, and then the smaller number is your ensemble.** (*piano student*)

Another example is given by a piano student who planned to engage her partner as co-player in a smaller part of her exam concert that is open for students’ own performance ideas. The open part can also, according to the students, be used for playing with other instruments and creating a program with a mixture of different composers. One student wanted to mix French and Finnish composers, and another one wanted to play music just by female composers, in the open part. Even when it comes to semi-open portfolio approaches, the analysis implies that percussion education is more open and flexible, which both permits and encourages students to think for themselves.

**Yeah, definitely. What you are interested in, what would you like to do. Of course, there are some really basic requirements. Let’s say everybody needs to play etudes on their drum, on xylophone, and on timpani. Everybody has to perform one piece every semester for keyboard instruments, it can be marimba or vibraphone or anything. And one piece multi-percussion like drums**

**“IT BECOMES CLEAR THAT THE CLOSED TRADITIONAL PORTFOLIO IS USED AS A TOOL TO FORM THE STUDENTS.”**



and any kind of mixed instruments. These are basic requirements. But if somebody is interested in body percussion, for example, he or she has to go for it. Then they have to discuss: They are not in the requirements but I would like to spend time with them, I would like to go deep, I would like to study them. So I will spend most of my time with them. And I will show some of them on the exam. And if the teacher says that it's okay, then it's okay. So in this sense the percussion department works quite flexibly, which is good. (*percussion student*)

Even other students than percussion students underline the freedom they have. For some of the students, however, it seems rather hard to decide for themselves, to choose among alternatives and how to use the more open part of the portfolio. Our interpretation of the analysis is that it seems important that students are trained to value, choose and decide as well as think about the consequences of their choices, maybe earlier than on master's level. Awareness training of such generic skills of course challenges both professors and in some cases tradition.

### Open portfolio

There are outspoken ideas among professors that the traditional and maybe also the semi-open portfolio limit a broader skill development among the students, and therefore some ask for a more open way of handling exams. Here is one example expressed by one of the professors:

I think, first of all, the repertoire we use is too narrow. We should have much more variety in that and many more individual possibilities for students to find what they want to play and what fits and suits them best. (*professor/leader*)

The professors show that they are aware that students' freedom of choice varies between instrument groups, which the students also express in similar ways, as well as saying that they can learn from each other to develop broad possibilities when it comes to styles, musical expression, and artistic abilities, "which gives people better chances to find kind of their own artistry", as one of the professors expresses it. According to one of the interviewees, one institution took a decision to abandon assessments in numbers and just give a pass or a fail in examinations to encourage freedom and openness. Such openness is seen as a challenge among some of the students, and as a possibility among others. "And I like that better. I mean, it's nice to have flexibility and be sort of independent, but sometimes it's too easy to just avoid things" (string student). One percussion student talks about how s/he aims to use the open portfolio, encouraged by the professor:

I'm mindful of what kind of repertoire I am going to

choose. So, I would like that to really describe me as a musician. (*percussion student*)

Others express that they think even more broadly regarding what to include in the exam concerts. One student states that (s) he has even chosen teaching as a part of his/her exam concert. Other examples are choices based on perceptions of pieces with good rhythm and interesting sound that the students like to play. As in the open parts of the semi-open portfolio, the open approach seems to encourage students to concentrate on female composers, for example, or composers from their own country, on creating a colorful program, and to play (with friends) in different constellations. The following quote shows one example:

I always tried to play very colorful programs on these occasions. So, I played a marimba solo, a vibraphone solo, a multi-percussion solo, with ... it means just many drums. And I played, I think, two chamber music pieces. One of them was solely percussion, quartet, and the other one was also a quartet, but with two pianos included. And two vibraphones. (*percussion student*)

In addition to the variation described above, some students state that they even include their own compositions in their exam concerts, and by that putting these in their portfolios. One piano student talks about combinations of different art-forms, such as video art and spoken word. A percussion student expresses that s/he aims to show co-play via digital communication tools with musicians on the other side of the world. To use the open portfolio in creative ways seems to demand an open professor as well, as one of the percussion students exemplifies:

Well, yes, I have embarked on quite ambitious projects for my exam and for performances. And they are some ... it's controversial, I think, because some teachers look at what you are trying to do and they are like, "maybe that's too much", and "you should maybe do less". And some teachers will really support you. Like, my teacher really liked that I was trying to do something big. My exam was maybe 18 minutes long of just [laughter] non-stop chamber music. (*percussion student*)

The students who create a portfolio driven by an open approach talk about their professors as open minded, excited, and curious. Again, professors in the material underline that it's becoming more and more common that students studying at specific instrumental departments are given the option to select their repertoire for the exam with completely free choice, and that the professors are trying to encourage the students to think about

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their profile as an artist, already during the final years of study. This suggests that a more closed portfolio seems to cultivate instrumentalists, while a more open portfolio approach cultivates musicians.

### Response approach

Based on a lack of encouraging feedback and fruitful discussions related to examinations, a more response-based approach, a form of transformative assessment, has developed in some of the educational situations investigated. As mentioned above, one step was to abandon number grading, or to just give fail or pass, and instead give verbal personal feedback to the students. One of the students shares an experience that illuminates such an approach, and put it in context.

Well, basically everything in this university works without grading. Technically there may be some teachers that give us some approximate grading. But there are no grades, so in the transcript of records it's just good or passed, there's no such thing as a grade. So usually we're assessed with feedback. So feedback is the main idea. So you play, then the jury talk to each other, and then they talk to you and they tell you what you can improve, what was good, what was bad. They focus on feedback, so your assessment is just feedback. And I like it here that you just need to show your own development, and you just need to show that you put in the work and it's good. You're doing a good job and that's how you're assessed, and you're assessed by what you could do better. But not like you're hoping for that grade because then I think it takes away the creativity and the actual meaning of an exam. (*string student*)

As expressed above, the response given at examinations is experienced as constructive and forward directed, as assessment for future learning based on sharing of experiences between students and professors. Another example from the material is that teachers in some instrumental groups have chosen to write informative texts to the students, while other teachers in the same departments do not follow this trend at all, according to the students. On the other hand, there are expressions in the material that show that professors within departments that do not accept verbal feedback, do it anyway, based on ideological reasons.

But with my professor, we had a long phone call last spring after the opera studio exam, when she gave personal feedback. And that was really motivating. (*voice student*)

Based on thoughts that personal individual verbal feedback is not legally safe, some departments have chosen to use declared criteria and percentages, according to the interviewees, when it comes to how different forms of knowledge should be balanced in assessment. Even if that is not a contradiction to response-based assessment, some students state that they miss the earlier, verbal and more precise and specific feedback.



I don't know, I think the former one was better, because it's more human when you can discuss with the others. Now it's like, you put those points and you don't see what the others put. And I don't know, maybe they are still discussing something. (*piano student*)

The quotation above shows how the idea of a criteria based equal form of assessment turns instrumental, and becomes assessment *as learning*. Even if the research material is dominated by expressions describing competitive and portfolio assessment approaches, there are also strong outspoken opinions regarding how the response approach is asked for as a form of transformative assessment practice. To illustrate that we choose to end this part of the results with a story told by one of the professors:

There are a lot of things in the whole positioning or the interaction in these feedback situations after an examination, or even during the lesson, that could be improved. And also I think that the feedback ... well, I think that's the beginning of everything, how one speaks to another person and ... if the position is in a way as collegial as it can be. Yeah, well let's think about the final exam. There's a master exam someone has, it's a concert. After that I remember one situation, this is of course ... even though this is a true story, it sounds a little bit like a caricature. There was a concert, someone played, played okay, and after that we have the hall, the back of the hall where the jury is. Then there is a place that nowadays they bring a chair, but at that time there was no chair. So the one who had just played one and a half hours or something like that went there and sat in the first row of the seats and needed to turn up like this to see the jury – a really, really awkward position. And then the criticism started: "That was bad, that was bad, that was bad". So, it wasn't only psychological, a really horrible situation, but it was also physical. Everything was wrong with that, even that the poor candidate had to sit in a very, very awkward position. So, after that I told my colleagues that it cannot be like that. So, after that it changed, but there were many things that were easy to improve, so people became a little bit in a more equal position, so that it's not so that one is down here and the jury is up there telling some kind of truths. So, this is one thing. I believe that a good feedback session would be such that the candidate

can also be heard. What does he or she think herself or himself, and ask questions, not make him or her say something if he or she doesn't want to. But anyway, the thing is that they need to get the possibility to speak up for themselves. And then another thing is this list of mistakes. It doesn't really give much information if one doesn't give a context to that. It only sounds like an opinion of someone. And then if it's the opinion of a professor, then it's a bad way of using authority. "I am saying to you that you are bad at that" and that's it. And this is something that I oppose very much. So, I think that it should be very different, very different and always somehow put in context. And discuss with the candidate. (*professor/leader*)

The story above shows the risk with using assessment in authoritative ways and gives example of how a response approach could be used instead. The response approach demands professors to be curious about the students they meet, to be interested in how they can formulate feedback that make students aware of their strengths and development areas, in a way that makes them inspired to work forward. However, it seems that the strong master-apprentice tradition, where professors' subjective perceptions determine how music should be played within instrumental traditions, still dominates even response-based assessment approaches.

## Discussion

In the following we discuss the results in relation to the research questions, to earlier research and higher music education practice. Analyzing how assessment practices can be experienced as a part of musicians' education and how they can convey values about teaching, learning and music, the observations presented below were made.

The result showed three different assessment approaches: the competition, the portfolio and the response approach based on the students' and professors' experiences of musicians' education. All these approaches refer to assessment traditions that give an indication of the wider culture of the conservatory. According

to previous studies, assessment is mostly steered by traditions.<sup>40</sup> This was also confirmed in the current study, not least through the use of the competition approach as a base for assessment.

**THE RESULTS ALSO** revealed assessment experiences that gave students greater responsibility for planning their learning towards a professional future. The portfolio as a tool for transformative assessment enables the learner to demonstrate the diversity of their acquired skills,<sup>41</sup> as well as to prepare themselves for the labor market.<sup>42</sup> One of the most critical aspects of assessment is feedback, both in terms of content and method. Reliance on well-designed criteria and holistic and analytic assessment concepts<sup>43</sup> in stimulating students' development was demonstrated in this study, particularly in the response and portfolio approach. Within all three approaches, there is a risk that assessment as learning tends to dominate the teaching practice. In order for assessment practices to support the

development of a musician's individuality and independence, the use of assessment practices must be steered by continuous reflection on the student-teacher relationship,<sup>44</sup> and focus on the students' holistic development.

Several values regarding teaching and learning emerged in the informants' descriptions of reflections on assessment practices through the ways the interviewees expressed their experiences of assessment. One way values may emerge was shown to be through how assessment is

performed. The most prominent value based on the analysis is freedom – freedom to decide on one's studies, repertoire, and musical formations (ensembles, trios etc.) and so on. Restricting freedom results in several complications like lack of responsibility or ignoring authenticity. The demand for freedom leads us to the next important value in the realm of ethical values: that is responsibility. Being able to take responsibility as a student or on the other hand being denied the opportunity to take responsibility lay different foundations for students' musical growth and professional career. The portfolio and response assessment approaches seem to be assessment approaches that encourage students to respect themselves and others, but when handled by the teachers in aware and supportive ways, the competition assessment approach can encourage such skills as well. Where a similar value of justice and human dignity is expressed between professor and student, or between students, it seems to enable the formation of a curious and brave person entering the competitive world of music as a unique musician.

The analysis also revealed aesthetic value conceptions connected to teaching and learning. The values seemed to be primarily steered by tradition and the professors' personal value conceptions regarding beauty and musical taste. There were examples, however, where students were encouraged to choose repertoire, prepare concerts or exams, and work with the sound and technique based on their own aesthetic values, which were

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expected and assessed in the open portfolios, for example, together with individually formed and performed musical performances. Focusing on studying assessment approaches enabled us to state, as expected, that the personal values of the interviewee primarily seemed to steer their teaching and learning actions, choices, and decisions. Both the competition approach and the closed and semi-closed assessment approaches implied a strong emphasis on teaching and learning activities focusing general and musical abilities on an expert level; while the importance of creative thinking as an interpretation attribute opened the way for a more dialogic way of teaching which opened opportunities for compiling concert programs and cooperating in the design of study programs. There were also examples of how assessment approaches encouraged teaching and learning that led students to become aware of their own goals and purposes and to express them courageously as active and curious learners. Teaching that demanded critical thinking as a necessary instrument in reflection and further planning was seen as important as it was perceived as a tool in students' activities to advance their musician's career. In addition, teaching and learning activities based on communication and collaboration were seen as important and highlighted as they encouraged openness and curiosity, not least as shown in the response approach.

**CONCERNING THE THIRD** research question of *what values regarding musical knowledge emerged in the informants' descriptions of reflection on assessment practices*, the following insights were noted. Both history-related knowledge and future-related knowledge were seen as important among developing musicians. History-related knowledge, which dominates the material, presupposes an already defined profession, specific for each instrumentalist group, where an important aim seemed to be to maintain and conserve traditions. Examples of such knowledge are to know the right seniors, knowing and maintaining the "canon", and technical skills. Future-related knowledge, a growing area according to the analysis, is based on a view of a dynamic and changing future where the aim for musicians is to contribute and form a bridge from the past to the future. Examples of such knowledge are the ability to create one's own goals and pathways towards them, the ability to find, choose and compose repertoire and create a program, to prepare, interpret, and improvise unknown music, understanding oneself and one's own capability, as well as being creative. Regardless of which assessment approach is used it becomes crucial that they can encourage either of the two areas of knowledge, which underline the need of awareness when it comes to assessment approaches among conservatory professors. Hence, it becomes obvious that the discussion regarding whether performance knowledge should be conceptualized or not is needed.<sup>45</sup> To encourage development of future-related musician knowledge, and cultivate reflective musicians, professors must be open minded, flexible, and not least reflecting on themselves.<sup>46</sup>

The analysis clearly shows the need for awareness regarding how assessment practices can be performed in transformative ways, and how they convey values about teaching, learning and

music, among both students and professors in higher music education. The crucial need for aware negotiations of values become obvious. It becomes important that all involved have insights into the consequences different approaches lead to for students' learning and further development towards musicians. Also, the need for collegial assessment discussions becomes obvious, within, as well as between, departments and institutions to avoid the risk that assessment, independent of approach, becomes instrumental, steered by traditions, and therefore solely conserves the master-apprentice tradition.<sup>47</sup> ✕

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