



Musical excellence in higher music education according to teachers' conceptions

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ENG Abstract: The concept of excellence is relevant in the training of musical instrument performers and has evolved within the field of education. Although the notion of excellence can be quite broad depending on different beliefs and social contexts, in education it is understood as a set of skills necessary to achieve specific goals determined by students' needs and their personal, socio-occupational, and political environment. In higher education, at least three main agents are involved in the teaching-learning process: students, faculty, and institutions (i.e., educational management and administrations). The case studies featured in this paper focus on teachers' conceptions of the strategies implemented by conservatories and higher schools of music in Spain in the pursuit of musical excellence. To this end, we conducted semi-structured interviews with five innovative, research-oriented music professors, as teachers are key agents who directly influence the teaching-learning process. Our analysis of the emerging categories from the interviews suggests that these teachers have applied innovative methods and approaches in their educational practice, although they are aware that such innovation is not widespread. Conservatories and higher schools of music do not appear to be consistently implementing effective, long-lasting changes; substantial transformations are still required. The results obtained from this research aim to offer proposals for improving teaching in higher music education institutions.

Keywords: instrumental training; conservatory; higher school of music; music education quality; innovation in music education.

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1. Introduction

Higher music education is undergoing changes which, in turn, have repercussions on pre-service music teacher training (Gaunt et al., 2021). In Spain, a regulatory change is taking place with the approval of the Law on Artistic Education ("Ley de Enseñanzas Artísticas", Boletín Oficial del Estado, 2024), which grants greater autonomy to conservatories and higher schools of music. They are thus brought somewhat closer to the university framework, in order to align more closely with the aims of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), to which Spain has belonged since 1999.

García-Jiménez (2016) states that university education strives for excellence. In Spain, conservatories and higher schools of music are part of the EHEA and offer the same degree as universities; we can thus infer that both types of institutions pursue excellence as well. We have carried out this study to explore which elements are implemented or should be implemented in Spanish conservatories and higher schools of music in pursuit of such excellence.

Excellence is also closely related to quality and educational success. The concept of educational quality, mentioned in curricula and standards set by educational policies worldwide, began to be implemented in the 1970s (Jorquera-Jaramillo, 2017). Stake (2001) viewed educational quality from two complementary

perspectives. The first perspective applies quality standards as a benchmark for learning assessment: for example, when an institution assesses a student to confer a degree. In this case, results are assessed based on external factors. Quality is also constructed internally by the agents involved in the teaching-learning (T-L) process who question the process itself. Stake emphasised the importance of the learning process and experience, regardless of the outcome, while Marchesi and Martin (2014) argued that educational quality concerns teachers and their roles, their leadership, the curriculum, and inter-level participation.

Excellence is a multidimensional construct that can be viewed from several angles: as a process, as a product, and as a goal. As a process, excellence is associated with the methods, evaluation, and feedback applied in the course of teaching-learning processes. As a product, excellence can be defined by a series of performance indicators (García-Jiménez, 2016). As a goal, excellence can be approached using a wide variety of concepts related to educational success and the achievement of objectives. Martin (2013) identified two main types of goals: those oriented towards performance (in which the desire is to obtain a degree, pass an exam or demonstrate what one knows) and those oriented towards mastery resulting from the desire to learn, where the process is more important than the result. Guskey (2013) argued that success generally refers to achieving something in relation to certain objectives. However, educators, researchers, and educational policymakers across the world define academic success in many different ways. According to Hawley and Chiang (2013), in the United States, academic achievement is commonly linked to the acquisition of skills to obtain a degree. However, mastery of a subject can also be understood as academic success (Braxton, 2000). It can even be achieved by helping students develop a good self-concept or enabling them to make realistic self-assessments (Sedlacek, 2004).

Like success and quality, the concept of excellence must continually be redefined and adapted to different contexts. Certain authors even question the very concept of excellence if it is based on individual success, as the resulting meritocracy would thus tend to reinforce societal inequalities (Sandel, 2020; Watermeyer & Olssen, 2016). Moreover, the richness of the teaching-learning process would be undervalued if excellence were limited to tests and results (Magdalena Gabriela, 2025). In our view, excellence cannot exist without the principle of equal access and its adaptation to different contexts (in this case, conservatories and higher schools of music). Excellence and equal access are complementary. Everyone, not just a select few, should be allowed to pursue excellence. Governments and institutions should implement policies and actions to address potential inequalities. Although excellence is often linked to liberal models and equal access tends to be associated with social democratic models, we ideally need to achieve a balance between the two (Marchesi and Martin, 2014).

Academic excellence should also be achieved through educational innovation in teaching models, teacher training, and the use of ICT (Escalante-Vargas et al., 2024; Sancho-Andrés et al., 2024). Moreover, excellence cannot be conceived separately from the agents that make it possible. Various studies have pointed out that some music instrument teachers do not fully identify with the teaching role, even though teaching music is their main source of income. This disconnect between a teacher's professional practice and their educational role can hinder the development of innovative pedagogical processes, affecting overall teaching quality and hampering the construction of meaningful learning experiences for students (Burwell, 2005; Cuesta Fernández, 1998; Duque & Jorquera-Jaramillo, 2013).

If educational excellence and success are related to employability, we need to envision new professional paths, as the job market is rapidly evolving (Hallam and Gaunt, 2012). Perhaps we should ask ourselves whether higher music education curricula truly reflect the challenges faced by young graduates, or whether we should strive for excellence regardless of their hopes of entering the job market.

Musical excellence is not necessarily synonymous with job market integration. In Western academic music, excellence has traditionally been associated with instrumental virtuosity; mastery of technical difficulty in standardised repertoire is what is most often rewarded (Kingsbury, 1988). This approach does not consider creative pursuits (Bennett and Burnard, 2016), social value (Gaunt et al., 2021), or the role of music as an agent of change (Jorquera-Jaramillo, 2010). High-level performers abound on the job market, all of whom possess sufficient technical and instrumental skills to obtain a post. However, job opportunities have changed. New musical professions have emerged, requiring specific and/or complementary training, and ranging from music therapy to cultural management and sonology (Pérez-Botello et al., 2024; Viñas et al., 2024). A music student should obviously be well-acquainted with their main field of study – their instrument and its technique – but in the course of their training, they should also be allowed to familiarise themselves with a range of issues that may work in favour of their professional and personal development in a globalised social world, thereby increasing their chances of finding employment.

Sternberg (2005) states that students need to develop “expertise”, i.e., a series of skills allowing them to become experts and achieve excellence in their field. Expertise results from a combination of motivation, adaptability, applied intelligence, and deliberate practice. Ericsson et al. (1993) affirmed that the expert level (a high degree of knowledge in a certain area) is achieved by “deliberate practice”, i.e., a series of structured, organised activities allowing someone to improve their mastery in a subject area. Deliberate practice requires concentration and continual feedback; it can also be an enjoyable activity. “Talent”, on the other hand, is understood as a combination of innate and/or learned abilities; through practice, those abilities allow an individual to achieve a high level of mastery in a certain area (Gagné, 2004). Hambrick et al. (2014) challenged the study by Ericsson et al. (1993) by questioning whether such individual “deliberate practice” truly made the difference in the performance of musicians and chess players compared to those who did not engage in such practice. Reviewing a large number of studies, they compiled and correlated continuous performance and time-on-activity measurements. Although they found a direct relationship between “accumulated deliberate

practice” (constant) and performance (29.9% of the variables), they also noted the presence of further determining factors (70.1%) marked as “inexplicable or potentially explainable” (p. 40), without specifying which ones they meant.

The concept of “successful intelligence,” introduced by Sternberg (1997), might shed light on these matters. According to Sternberg, intelligent people learn from their mistakes and can adapt their acquired knowledge to the context of specific situations. He added that intelligence is not necessarily synonymous with good exam grades; rather, it requires a combination of analytical, practical, and creative thinking. These considerations are fundamental if we want to start introducing meaningful methodological transformations in higher music education (Escalante-Vargas & Jorquera-Jaramillo, 2022). Moreover, Sternberg affirmed that creative people who display successful intelligence are capable of solving problems on their own or, at least, they know how to ask for assistance. Mistakes along the way are welcome; issues are constantly rethought, thus reinforcing the capacity for critical thinking. Although some might believe that such elements depend solely on the learner, they are also the responsibilities of an innovative teacher¹. They should thus be taken into account in teaching-learning processes, as well as by educational institutions (as institutions are ultimately composed of individuals). All participating agents should work in favour of improving teaching-learning processes.

In short, the idea of success can be closely related to the concept of excellence by acknowledging that the achievement of excellence requires success in the various actions that make up the teaching-learning process. For Bucura (2020), success is linked to the achievement of a specific goal, such as winning a competition or an orchestra audition, whereas excellence is a more extended set of continuously successful actions. Therefore, a priori, a student could achieve excellence regardless of their level of expertise if it aligned with their goals. Conversely, a brilliant, capable, talented student who was unable to carry out a series of continuous successful actions due to particular circumstances might not achieve excellence.

To summarise this literature review, students can achieve excellence through a combination of circumstances and situations that allow for their holistic development. A talented student can achieve excellence by applying strategies that lead to it. For example, an expert clarinettist who is outstanding as a performer must first develop the notion of talent and will need to find a favourable context, as it would be difficult for them to flourish as a professional musician in a context of war, where culture is not a basic necessity. This clarinettist will be successful if they can achieve their goals. It is therefore essential for individuals to develop the kind of intelligence described by Sternberg, along with the necessary talent and the ability to adapt to varying contexts.

In this study, we sought to examine teachers’ views of musical excellence in Spanish conservatories and higher schools of music. Our long-term goal is to confront their views with students’ views, which will be featured in a future study. Considering the current state of affairs described above, we posed the following research questions:

- What are the successful behaviours in students and teachers that promote the pursuit of excellence, according to our interviewees?
- What elements related to the professional identity of students and teachers influence teaching-learning processes, according to our interviewees?
- What are the indicators of success in education and the elements that lead to excellence in the field of music, according to our interviewees?

2. Methodology

This research is based on the interpretive paradigm and includes elements of the socio-critical paradigm. In other words, we are not only seeking to understand the participants’ proposals; rather, the innovations they suggest should also serve as a future reference point for teacher training in higher music education.

2.1. Participants

The participants in this study were five musical instrument teachers with expert profiles, teaching at conservatories and higher schools of music; they have a high level of musical and teaching knowledge and are involved in artistic and/or research activities. Although the interviewees may incorporate certain traditional elements into their teaching, they generally favour innovation, as they are conscientious professionals who fulfil most of the characteristics discussed by Escalante-Vargas et al. (2024) and Sancho-Andrés et al. (2024). Within the current teaching framework, still marked by tradition (Pozo et al., 2022), these teaching proposals represent a significant change. The five participants hold at least a Higher Degree in Music (“Título Superior de Música”) in an instrumental speciality. Four of them are teachers at a conservatory or higher school of music in Spain; three are tenured professors who obtained their positions through competitive examination. The fifth interviewee is a professor at a university in northern Europe, where her main occupation is research. Her importance as a participant in our study lies in her individual, original contribution to our subject. Born and educated in Spain, she has published numerous scientific articles on music teaching in conservatories and higher schools of music. She thus provides an external, scientific perspective on higher music education in

¹ Several characteristics of innovative teachers in higher music education are enumerated in Escalante-Vargas et al. (2024) and Sancho-Andrés et al. (2024).

general, which can serve as a complement to the other four interviewees' analysis of the Spanish situation. The five participants were selected through intentional sampling and by convenience. The difficulty of accessing expert personnel led us to use "snowball sampling" to identify the last interviewee. Participant suitability was taken into account in all cases. Our analysis of interview data reached saturation in the fifth interview, defining it as theoretical sampling (Cohen et al., 2012; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Sandín, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 2002).

2.2. Tools and techniques

From a qualitative perspective, we aimed to obtain detailed information through semi-structured interviews (Ibarra-Sáiz et al., 2023) using a script that addressed each dimension to be studied, following the group of dimensions identified by Escalante-Vargas & Jorquera-Jaramillo (2023). This type of conversation allowed the interviewer to rephrase questions and, on occasion, to identify emerging categories during the discussion (Olaz 2012; Valles-Martínez 2014). The interviews were conducted via video call and transcribed for subsequent analysis.

2.3. Data analysis and determination of categories

Data analysis was carried out using Atlas.ti. We focused on our interviewees' conceptions of excellence in music education and the strategies they implement or would implement in teaching-learning processes. In addition, as part of a broader investigation project, we identified emerging categories that comprise the dimension of musical excellence and educational success, as the connection between success and excellence in educational processes is key to the professional development of future graduates. We analysed the following categories:

- Successful behaviour in students: observable and modifiable actions that enable a student to achieve excellence.
- Students' professional identity: how students relate to music and their professional future.
- Successful behaviour in teachers: actions taken by teachers that aim for teaching excellence and help students achieve excellence, enhancing their strengths and addressing their weaknesses, while taking the current socio-occupational, political, and economic context into account.
- Teachers' professional identity: teacher training and the emergence of professional identity.
- Principles of success in education: essential factors and general elements that point the way to excellence.

3. Results and discussion

Successful behaviour in students

Sternberg (1997) lists several factors that help students succeed: motivation, family support, the teacher's role, and support from friends (Davidson et al., 1996; Sloboda et al., 1996). Moreover, self-confidence and enjoyment boost a student's motivation and contribute to the process's ultimate success (Gorbe, 2017; Hallam & Gaunt, 2012).

All five of our interviewees identified basic indicators such as commitment and motivation. They also addressed the issue of the development of personal and professional identity, the latter related to students studying what fulfils them and what they enjoy. Burwell (2012) states that motivation and the notion of talent are essential to instrumental practice; one of our interviewees, MC,² added that nothing can be achieved without sacrifice and discipline (a view that is perhaps more in line with traditional methodologies). This interviewee focused on the subject of motivation through goal achievement, expressing her opinion that a motivation feedback loop should develop between the student and the teacher. She also finds it important to remain humble, maintain a positive attitude, and be open to new ideas, musical repertoires, or working approaches. This interviewee gave the example of one of her students who, even though he mainly wanted to devote himself to teaching mathematics, was also studying music to achieve further development as a person: "He's a guy who gets top grades in engineering; he has already passed a spectacular fourth-year university exam and wants to become a high school math teacher" (1:68/71³).

This teacher (MC) believes that student involvement in the class as a whole and in the projects she proposes is essential. She states that although some students are well-educated and hardworking, they can sometimes have excessive self-esteem or ego, a lack of humility, and perhaps even a lack of self-concept. JV, another interviewee, also links motivation to goal achievement. However, he believes that students are motivated solely by the achievement of goals, thereby ignoring the possibility that some may need other types of reinforcement at certain times.

AP, our third interviewee, seems to offer a more innovative approach, as he links students' motivation to their having well-developed emotional skills. In his interview, AP linked excellence to educational success and stated that excellence must go beyond the purely musical; he also linked it to professional development

² To guarantee anonymity, we masked our interviewees' identity by replacing their names with two-letter codes: MC, RC, JV, AP, and CT.

³ 1:68/71 is the quotation reference code. For example, these numbers indicate: document number, number of quotation without repetition, and total number of quotations from which it was extracted. Certain quotes appear in more than one code.

and the search for student identity as a basic pillar of the teaching-learning process. This interviewee seems to link the individual's identity with their professional identity. He believes that opening new horizons ("opening windows") in class creates spaces for professional development that also leave room for personal development, although this need not be the case (Duque & Jorquera-Jaramillo, 2014, 2016).

"Let them continue to be themselves, let them be improved versions of themselves; let them be the versions they want to be, let them play what they want to play, what they need to play, let them explore where they want to go [...]. For me, educational success means that they do not emerge diminished as human beings [...], but that they have matured in the process and improved as musicians, as performers, as artists. And for us to have opened many windows for them to look through, so that they can choose to keep what really interests them or what they like." (3:56/71)

RC, our fourth interviewee, is concerned about poor working conditions for young graduates and the scarcity of job opportunities in the orchestral field (Pérez-Botello et al., 2024; Viñas et al., 2024). She links success to specific employability skills related to training, arguing that those who love what they do and are happy with it are the most employable. This might seem reminiscent of the Romantic idea of the bohemian musician as described by Lorenzo de Reizabal and Benito Gómez (2025). However, according to the latter authors, happiness is also related to having previously found employment. This interviewee, like AP, states that students must develop resilience to overcome difficulties, transcend boundaries, and venture into the unknown. Students who "love what they do", according to RC, are those who have managed to break with the arbitrary, gratuitous power hierarchy of traditional teaching one often encounters in conservatories and higher schools of music, possibly because of a lack of specific training for professors to teach at such levels (Escalante-Vargas & Jorquera-Jaramillo, 2022, 2023).

"Do I choose the teacher who pushes me hard because I know that I will get results? In reality, that's not the case. The figures show us that no, [those students] don't get placed, that they will then have to go through the struggle, right? They'll have to go through the difficulty or the challenge of combining a little bit of playing a musical instrument with a little bit of something else [...] They're very frustrated. So the ones who really break that stereotype, the ones who react against those power hierarchies and so on, who may have a hard time when they realise it and when they have to put their cards on the table, those are the ones who will turn out to be really interesting artistically and who will ultimately succeed." (4:13/14)

This should not be confused with a lack of rigour; quite the contrary. There are demanding teachers whose students achieve results. What is important is the ability of each of the agents involved in the teaching-learning process to develop and implement effective methods (Capiestrán-Gracia, 2015).

Student motivation and the development of independence remain essential for achieving musical excellence, but it is also important that students develop their artistic and professional identity through music. RC adds that, upon graduation, students should be able to count on support networks or networking opportunities, both inside and outside their music academy.

JV likewise mentions motivation as a fundamental element in achieving excellence through success in education. He states that goal achievement motivates students, although certain individuals may require varying levels of reinforcement or motivation depending on their circumstances (López-Íñiguez et al., 2022). This teacher, like AP, believes that group awareness, understood as the feeling of belonging to a class or a specific instrumental department, has a very positive effect on teaching-learning processes (Cortés-Heredia et al., 2024), which is why the development of interpersonal relationships is so important. And, of course, personal identity is key.

Students' professional identity

Throughout life, human beings develop characteristics that shape their professional identity, which in turn translates into a person's commitment to their occupation (Escalante-Vargas & Jorquera-Jaramillo, 2022). Addressing this subject in conservatories and higher schools of music is essential to help students develop their professional identity at a time of significant upheaval in employability.

All interviewees are aware of the difficulty that graduates of higher schools of music face in finding music-related work, as noted by López-Íñiguez and Bennett (2020). Indeed, in recent decades, the employability of young graduates has become a matter of particular concern (Bennett, 2016; Munnelly, 2020). If employability is considered one of the pillars of educational success and excellence, then educational institutions must address the challenges students face when entering a constantly evolving labour market (Hallam and Gaunt, 2012).

Gaunt et al. (2021) propose establishing a connection between the musician's identity, the musician's profession, and their potential within society. Precisely, one element that stands out in these interviews is the importance of the search for identity as a basis for professional development. MC believes that all teachers should help students build their professional identity: some will want to be orchestra instrumentalists, while others will want to be educators who teach in conservatories, secondary schools, or primary schools. She proposes that conservatories and higher schools of music should offer pedagogical training to help students acquire teaching skills before entering the job market; thus, in their teaching practice, they will not have to rely solely on experience. However, this interviewee overlooks other possible areas, such as contemporary and non-classical music, music and health, and cultural management.

For RC, the period of university-level music studies is the ideal time for the student to develop an artistic identity and a sense of identity as a human being, getting involved in something that satisfies them. They must also make professional connections and stay up to date with what is happening in the world, including music, politics, economics, and society. Like MC, this interviewee believes we must be realistic about each individual's particular circumstances and the social realities they will face in the job market. She proposes a triangulation between what one wants to do, what one can do and what society allows one to do.

AP believes that the period of university-level music studies is a time when students can broaden their career paths and possibilities, provided they enjoy and identify with them. Such a goal can be complex. The teacher takes on the role of a guide and helps their students to learn and discover what they want to do with their knowledge, considering their personal and social circumstances. However, AP does not mention the need to analyse the job market and the possible career opportunities for graduates, a subject that is rarely addressed in conservatories and higher schools of music (Pérez-Botello et al., 2024; Viñas et al., 2024). Nevertheless, such an analysis can help students refine their identity over time.

“[It is important for us] to have produced an artist who has found the path they wish to follow, their Ithaca. What do you want to do? Do you want to become a solo instrumentalist? Do you want to perform in ensembles? Do you want to do contemporary music? Do you want to do Renaissance music? Do you want to play in an orchestra? What do you want to become, and how are you aiming for it? Do you like performance art? Search for yourself. Find yourself.” (3:16/8)

In terms of career opportunities, our interviewees find that conservatories and higher schools of music generally train students to become orchestra musicians or teachers, as indicated in the previous quote. However, according to Pérez-Botello et al. (2024) and Viñas et al. (2024), everyone is aware that new avenues must be explored, as the professional music field is a small, difficult-to-access market (Beeching, 2010; Bennett et al., 2012; López-Íñiguez and Bennett, 2020). There thus seems to be a contradiction between what students are being trained to do and the actual constraints they will face after graduating. In addition, four of our interviewees talk about the current need to link music, health, and social well-being. Participating in social interventions can be a real job opportunity for young graduates, though this remains little explored in Spanish conservatories and higher schools of music, beyond organising specific events. Furthermore, all our interviewees are convinced that the field of research is here to stay and offers clear job market opportunities. It is essential for students to have contacts and support networks, but so is the general availability of jobs.

Successful behaviour in teachers

All interviewees argue that teachers need to engage with their students and their classes. RC maintains that this is not always easy, as the administration sometimes fails to count all of a teacher's hours of dedication. Thus, a teacher's degree of commitment will ultimately depend on their motivation.

“It's unpaid work, and you have the energy now because you're young, but in 10 or 15 years' time [...] it will start to weigh down on your shoulders... and there will come a point when you may stop doing it. Because that's just the way it is. It's a question of how much support you get. And it's a shame.” (4:12/12)

Our interviewees believe that there has been a trend towards change in recent years, as noted by López-Íñiguez & Bennett (2020) and Myers (2016). However, further institutional support would be required. Our interviewees discuss change taking place on several levels. At the institutional level, conservatories and higher schools of music seem to be expanding into new specialities and projects, such as jazz, flamenco, and contemporary music. At the methodological level, they mention a series of relatively rare innovative projects in certain conservatories that are more closely aligned with the current socio-occupational reality, taking students' needs, ideas, and interests into account. However, such proposals are sporadic and again depend on the motivation and dedication of certain teachers. Finally, research in all fields, but especially in the arts, seems to have become established, despite the reluctance of a large portion of the teaching staff and widely differing opinions about what should be researched and who should conduct it. For example, MC argues that those who should conduct research in conservatories and higher schools of music are teachers of theoretical subjects, perhaps overlooking the fact that teachers of other specialities can conduct research in fields as important as creation, instrumental practice, education, and ethnography. Such proposals should become an integral part of innovative teaching aimed at success and excellence.

However, changes such as these still need to mature within conservatories and higher schools of music. Although they are indeed offering new specialities, they still tend to reproduce the classical music training model. According to CT, this may not be the most appropriate approach:

“So now they're including flamenco in the conservatory. But the way flamenco is studied is very different from the way classical music is studied. So they try to fit a thoroughly different style into the classical conservatory mould. [...] If we reproduce the conservatory model for this speciality, it is clear what the result will be, and we can already see it: it's an absolute failure.”

Moreover, these new specialities, like traditional ones, need to adopt current, innovative methodologies that have recently become established and widely accepted within the educational community. And if music academy administrations consider the field of research, they should allocate a paid schedule to cover it, as noted by RC.

According to MC, a fundamental element to bear in mind is humility among teaching staff, avoiding egos and the exercise of gratuitous power over students and fellow teachers. In addition, teacher involvement must go beyond merely teaching an instrument and organising activities, courses, projects, performances, etc. The teacher must have a true desire to work, and this is not always the case. This interviewee was the only one to specifically emphasise the importance of a teacher being artistically active at a high level. Thus, further key elements beyond artistic activity must exist, as our five innovative teachers seem to agree. In fact, a recent study (Escalante-Vargas et al., 2025) found that students at conservatories and higher schools of music valued a teacher's subject-matter knowledge and classroom communication skills more than the teacher's artistic activity outside the classroom.

Teachers' commitment to their professional practice seems to be key. CT affirms that enthusiasm, empathy, and profound motivation are essential. This interviewee believes that teachers should remain accessible and continue to provide personal and professional advice, even after students have completed their degrees. CT's view seems to be based on the belief that conservatories and higher schools of music should offer specific training opportunities focused on entrepreneurship and employability (Pérez-Botello et al., 2024; Viñas et al., 2024). Perhaps in that way it would not be necessary to continue advising students, but only on an ad hoc basis.

To identify factors that play a major role in establishing successful processes, RC recommends close collaboration among teachers, along with reflection and continuous evaluation of their actions (Pozo et al., 2022). According to her, this has hitherto been done only on an ad hoc basis at conservatories and higher schools of music. Continuous training to keep teachers up to date and research (as opposed to MC) in all areas is essential.

Teachers' professional identity

Professional identity seems to be a fairly common problem in music education: a musician working as a teacher may not feel they are fulfilling their professional identity (Duque & Jorquera-Jaramillo, 2014, 2016). Furthermore, in Spain, as in other European countries, pedagogical training is not required for teaching; only a degree in music is required (Bautista, 2020; Sánchez-Escribano et al., 2022). An instrument teacher's professional identity is associated with their training as an instrumentalist and could be more or less linked to their identity as a performer, precisely because of the importance they ascribe to the theoretical and practical training they received at a conservatory or a higher school of music (Escalante-Vargas & Jorquera-Jaramillo, 2023). This could partially explain the lack of motivation observed in many music teachers regarding their teaching practice. However, motivation to teach is fundamental to an educator (Burwell, 2012, 2016), as teaching should not be viewed simply as a way of earning a living.

Despite these apparent discrepancies, interest in pedagogy seems to have increased in recent years. Music academy administrations are offering more and more teacher training courses, although these tend to be sporadic and sometimes decontextualised (Escalante-Vargas & Jorquera-Jaramillo, 2022, 2023). In this regard, although all our interviewees received traditional academic training at conservatories and higher schools of music, they chose to pursue further training avenues to help them adapt to new circumstances as teachers. However, only on few occasions did they train in the field of pedagogy proposed by conservatories / higher schools of music and their corresponding administrations. Instead, they undertook formal studies in psychology, musicology, or art history, as well as informal and non-formal studies in teaching or painting. Despite being teachers, none of them claims to have undergone specific, formal professional training in teaching per se; they trained in other areas instead. This may indicate a general lack of interest, a lack of attractive proposals on the part of institutional administrations, or both.

Similarly, four of our five interviewees seem to identify themselves professionally as professors in terms of dedication and salary. The fifth interviewee identifies herself as a researcher. All believe that many teachers tend to see themselves principally as performers for whom teaching is merely a way to earn a living. According to our interviewees, this can be a problem if it is linked to the idea of being a "frustrated artist". If a musician is unable to pursue a career in performance, they will tend to pass that frustration on to their students through teaching methods that have little to do with current reality and more to do with the training they themselves received. In other words, they teach as they learned, without first questioning the suitability of their methods.

"If you want to break with all that goes on so often in conservatories, all those hierarchies and that mode of teaching that is so traditional, [it isn't easy], and I'm the one who's telling you because I've been through it myself." (4:15/16).

Furthermore, all our interviewees find that it is important to receive specific training to become teachers. They add that this should be foreseen as a subject in higher music education.

All in all, professional identity seems to be closely linked to training. Identity and training seem to have evolved in tandem throughout the lives of our interviewees, closely associated with their concerns, interests, and dedication, in this case, to teaching. AP, for example, states that he never stops learning, especially informally and non-formally. Reading is a great source of knowledge. Furthermore, AP is the participant who most clearly demonstrates his passion for education through positive, enthusiastic discourse in the interviews.

If conservatories and higher schools of music took greater effort to address students' ideas and interests, it might help prevent the emergence of professional identity issues among future music teachers at all levels (Escalante-Vargas & Jorquera-Jaramillo, 2022).

Principles of success in education

Institutions and teachers are also responsible for pursuing educational success to build musical excellence and bring about continuous improvements in teacher training, methodological innovation, and the use of technologies, and achieving transparency in the evaluation of the various agents involved in the teaching-learning process (Escalante-Vargas et al., 2024; Escalante-Vargas & Jorquera-Jaramillo, 2023; Marchesi & Martín, 2014). Quality management and institutional accreditation are also essential elements (López Abreu et al., 2015).

Perhaps professors in conservatories and higher schools of music need to ask themselves whether they are fulfilling what teaching in the 21st century truly requires. The rapid evolution of society requires higher music education institutions to offer holistic music training that assigns an important role to health, well-being, project management, and entrepreneurial skills, in addition to purely instrumental skills (Hallam & Gaunt, 2012).

Our interviewees all want their students to be able to play and master their instrument as well as possible; in addition, they propose a holistic learning approach attuned to the modern-day world. Music education is more than just learning to play an instrument well. RC proposes new ways to combine music-instrument teaching with social and environmental engagement, as also suggested by Angelo et al. (2019) and Westerlund & Gaunt (2022). She proposes workshops on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to raise student awareness that there is no Planet B and that music can support social change by emphasising mutual respect among human beings on the basis of shared values. Some SDGs are directly related to music; others, as RC adds, may be less related but simply cannot be ignored in today's world and need to be understood.

CT believes that a successful process is one in which students find what they are looking for in an institution and are happy to study there. This, as CT specifies, is the result of change, progress, and adaptability to real-life situations. Closely related to this, AP argues that it is essential for students to learn to respect themselves and believe in their future while staying true to themselves. He affirms that a process is successful when students can work in the field they have studied, and this can be an indicator of excellence. He mentions certain graduates of his centre who occupy important positions in the music world; meanwhile, other graduates have found work in roles that reflect their specific capacities, thanks to his academy's respect for each person's individuality. He highlights the dynamism of his conservatory and the number of interesting, top-level projects that are carried out there as its strengths. In addition, the centre has specific teaching profiles depending on musical style; thus, students receive training from six different teachers for their instrument, covering every area from orchestral repertoire to hands-on instrumental maintenance. Ultimately, AP hopes that students in conservatory will gain an experience as close as possible to the reality of life "on the job".

For RC, one key to success lies in teachers adapting to students' needs, an approach shared by the other interviewees. Students are people first and musicians second; at the higher school of music where she teaches, they are confronted, on a daily basis, with scenarios that simulate the reality they will face in the future. RC believes that one of her centre's strengths is that Bachelor's, Master's, and doctoral studies are all conducted within the same institution, thereby promoting connections across different levels and specialities. However, in light of the socio-critical paradigm (Alvarado and García, 2008; Freire, 1976; Habermas, 1994), RC fails to consider that this might reduce the richness and variety of knowledge acquired through education, as broader, more pluralistic training might be less available in such scenarios. Researchers are also teachers, and this encourages innovation. She also states that her centre's functioning and its curricula are continually reviewed and evaluated, enabling the institution to improve and adapt to new realities. On the other hand, when numerous optional subjects are on offer, the specific needs of each student can be more readily identified, thus opening new doors of opportunity. She even affirms that if a student needs specific training, her institution tries to offer it.

JV believes that success in education occurs when a student is happy with what they are doing and has become sufficiently independent to do without their former teacher, returning to them only to share their achievements once they have completed their studies. He points out that another indicator of a successful teaching-learning process is when students gain self-confidence and overcome their fears of recording themselves, of showing themselves on social media, or of taking the initiative and responsibility for their learning into their own hands (thus breaking with traditional methodologies).

Another essential element in successful educational processes depends on the institutions themselves. They must provide and facilitate well-thought-out, well-established ongoing training modules and projects (given that personal projects based solely on a specific teacher's dedication and interest invariably end when that teacher loses motivation). In addition, conservatories and higher schools of music should link the training they offer to real life so that students feel identified and can relate what they do in the centre to what they do outside the centre.

The interrelationships among the different agents involved in teaching-learning processes are another element related to musical excellence and educational success, and such interrelationships are a subject of debate. Our interviewees highlighted the need to avoid unequal power dynamics between teachers and students. AP adds the need to promote peer learning. All interviewees agree that the atmosphere in class and individual lessons should be relaxed, without the teacher becoming the student's friend or "therapist".

All our interviewees find that an active, positive, collaborative relationship among teachers benefits the teaching-learning process. This relationship seems to be developing, as they describe, particularly among innovative teachers on specific occasions and in certain projects. However, the four interviewees who teach at conservatories and higher schools of music in Spain state that they would like to have better professional

relationships with their colleagues. AP and JV state that their colleagues do not understand their way of doing things, although both interviewees receive support from their administration management team.

Those four interviewees describe the relationship with their colleagues as “fiefdoms”, where each teacher does what they think is best without remaining in contact with their colleagues. Subjects are taken out of context; communication and coordination among teachers are lacking; and few examine their own professional practice critically.

Relationships among students can be tense due to the competitive atmosphere often reigning in conservatories and higher schools of music. Such a competitive climate may result from a view of success based on musical interpretation and the final product (Martin, 2013), a view which, according to our interviewees, does nothing to benefit teaching-learning processes. If students want to improve as learners and as musicians, and if they simply want to become better people, an atmosphere of respect and collaboration with one another is essential:

“Among the students, there were petty skirmishes of the type ‘you’re better, I’m [better] ...’ And that’s what we need to avoid. I believe that what students need to understand is that they must respect one another and that each of them has their own path to follow.” (1:133/55)

Although there is still a long way to go, teaching-learning processes in conservatories and higher schools of music seem to be evolving. Our interviewees describe a series of innovative, up-to-date elements in higher music education, such as those addressed in Capistrán-Gracia (2019, 2021, 2022), López-Íñiguez & Bennett (2020, 2021), Pozo (2022), and Pozo et al. (2022), regarding holistic learning (going beyond mere knowledge of the instrument), independence, training assessment, and employability.

4. Conclusions

According to our interviewees, achieving excellence requires successful behaviour on the part of both students and teachers. They highlight the commitment and motivation of students, teachers and institutions. However, our interviewees make relatively little reference to institutions, despite their fundamental role. They also believe in developing resilience, independence, and networking as basic pillars on the path toward excellence.

Regarding the specific employability potential of graduates of conservatories and higher schools of music, our interviewees are aware that new avenues beyond traditional orchestral or solo career paths must be explored. If the job market evolves, the type of university-level training designed to prepare students for it must evolve as well. Obviously, students’ ideas, interests, and situations need to be considered, but the broader political, legislative, economic, and job-market context must also be taken into account. All of this can be understood as a three-way interaction among what the student wants to do, what they can do, and the reality they confront.

Furthermore, interpersonal relationships in every sense – i.e., among students, teachers, and institutions – must also serve as a benchmark for excellence. Students should not merely “sit in class”, isolated from the context in which they live. In this regard, perhaps academies and teachers have not done enough to make these relationships among agents stable and systematic. On the other hand, research is one of the emerging developments in higher music education, especially with the impending application of the Law on Artistic Education (“Ley de Enseñanzas Artísticas”, Boletín Oficial del Estado, 2024), which promotes research.

Regarding professional identity, teacher training across all areas (including continuing education) should serve as another fundamental pillar of excellence in music education. While it may be true that there are good instrument teachers without teacher training and who rely solely on their own experience, the likelihood of finding good teachers increases if specific pedagogical training is available. Our interviewees maintain that many of their colleagues do not truly identify as teachers, even though teaching is their main occupation. Nevertheless, our interviewees find that the situation is evolving. Furthermore, they believe that the development of students’ personal and, accordingly, professional identity will be the basis for their specific employability and successful incorporation into the job market.

These interviews also provide relevant insights into principles for success in music education, including the need to create pleasant, relaxed environments that avoid negative competition and encourage group awareness and teamwork. Conservatories and higher schools of music should be places for meeting and exchange, where support networks emerge. Moreover, these institutions should support the creation of professional networks that help graduates enter the job market. Our interviewees also highlight institutions’ and teachers’ responsibility in striving for excellence in music education.

However, none of our five interviewees mentioned any relationship between the institutions (the music school administration) and the student body. One might get the impression that this relationship is irrelevant or non-existent, despite the fact that institutions are meant to facilitate the teaching-learning process by placing the student at its centre. There appears to be a certain institutional despotism, an institution-student hierarchy, in which the student is considered, but without involving them.

In short, our interviewees, in line with the literature, made a series of interesting, innovative proposals within the framework of conservatories and higher schools of music. However, they seem caught between traditionalism and the need to innovate. The latter is sometimes demanded of them, without really knowing what that innovation consists of or how it can be carried out in an unsupportive context. It is worth asking to what extent the interviewees actually implement these actions and ideas in their day-to-day teaching practice. To assess this, a questionnaire will be distributed to students.

According to our interviewees and in line with previous research, there is an evident need for curricular adaptation. At the same time we note a general lack of training in methodology and teaching innovation (Cuenca Rodríguez et al., 2025; Escalante-Vargas et al., 2025; Escalante-Vargas & Jorquera-Jaramillo, 2023; García Torán et al., 2023), but also in psychoeducation (Pozo et al., 2022), health and well-being (Ballenberger et al., 2023; Barrett, 2006; Fortuny et al., 2025; Marzal et al., 2025; Sancho-Andrés et al., 2025) or entrepreneurship and job opportunities (Bennett, 2016; Bennett & Burnard, 2016; Munnely, 2020; Pérez-Botello et al., 2024; Viñas et al., 2024). Furthermore, given that we selected our interviewees based on their conviction that they are innovative teachers with research experience, one might wonder what happens to the large number of teachers who are not researchers, have no training beyond their musical instrument, and are not open to research and innovation. However, in some specific cases, certain teachers are apparently getting involved in innovation and are starting to respond to students' expressed needs. This is evidenced by our interviewees' statements and our literature review, which noted a growing number of publications on these topics. While these may be signs of change, there is still a long way to go before such proposals gain wider acceptance and become truly established in Spain's top music academies.

5. References

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