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**Not playing any more: a qualitative investigation of why amateur musicians cease or
continue membership of performing ensembles**

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Abstract

The benefits and pleasures of musical participation are reasonably well-known, and yet the number of adults engaging in these activities is only a small proportion of those who learn instruments and participate during their school years. This article reports on three linked studies that investigated the experiences of ‘lapsed’ participants: those who had sought out opportunities for playing in adulthood, before deciding to withdraw for a range of reasons. These reasons are explored through the profiles of the ‘enthusiastic returner’, ‘reluctant retiree’, ‘stressed withdrawer’, ‘tired outsider’ and ‘contented reminiscer’, using qualitative data from participant observation, focus groups, questionnaires and interviews with two amateur ensembles in the North Midlands of England. Implications are considered for lifelong musical engagement, ensemble leadership, and future research into musical participation, identity and learning.

Contributors' details

Stephanie Pitts is Professor of Music Education at the University of Sheffield, with research interests in musical participation, arts audiences, and lifelong learning. She is the author of *Valuing Musical Participation* (Ashgate, 2005), *Chances and Choices: Exploring the Impact of Music Education* (OUP, 2012) and, with Eric Clarke and Nicola Dibben, *Music and Mind in Everyday Life* (OUP, 2010). Her ongoing research concerns the experiences of lapsed and partial arts participants, and she has recently finished editing (with Karen Burland) a new book on audiences, *Coughing and Clapping* (Ashgate, 2014).

Katharine Robinson is a graduate of the BMus and MA Psychology of Music courses at the University of Sheffield, whose research has explored motivations for amateur musical participation across the lifespan. She has been a research assistant on projects relating to provision of music in primary schools, and on the AHRC Cultural Value project based at the Sheffield Performer and Audience Research Centre (<http://www.sparc.dept.shef.ac.uk>).

Kunshan Goh is an occupational therapist from Singapore, who completed a Masters in Psychology of Music at the University of Sheffield. Her research interests are situated within the broad field of music participation, with the aim to understand the extent and effects of music engagement on a diverse human population. She is currently based in Singapore working with people with neurological conditions.

Keywords

Musical participation, amateur music-making, motivation, commitment, ceasing playing

Not playing any more: a qualitative investigation of why amateur musicians cease or continue membership of an ensemble

Why participate in music – and why not?

In a recent and welcome proliferation of research into lifelong engagement in music, studies from a range of musical genres and academic disciplines have demonstrated the value and attraction of musical participation (e.g. Matarasso, 1997; Pitts, 2005; Finnegan, 2007). Case studies from the UK, Canada and Australia have shown how disadvantaged social groups (Bailey & Davidson, 2002) and elderly citizens (Southcott, 2009) find a source of wellbeing and support through their musical activities, while professionals in a range of occupations seek additional purpose and satisfaction in their lives through working towards a collective performance goal (Pitts, 2005). While some participants struggle to articulate the value of music in their lives, seeing it as an obvious and essential part of their existence (Pitts, 2009), common themes of improved quality of life (Coffman, 2002) emerge across the research evidence, as musical participation is shown to improve health and well-being (Perkins & Williamon, 2014), including strength, endurance and coordination skills (Batt-Rawden & DeNora, 2005), and to provide social bonds (Carucci, 2012) and a source of emotional support (Hallam, Creech, Varvarigou & McQueen, 2012).

The question that always remains at the end of a study of musical participation, however, is “If this is so brilliant, why isn’t everyone doing it?”. For those who do participate, the value of their musical activities is compelling, and outweighs the disadvantage of having to go to a rehearsal after tiring day at work, or struggling to memorise words for a solo song: overcoming these challenges becomes part of the pleasure, and each new accomplishment brings with it a search for the next goal (Pitts, 2004). Stebbins, in his studies of amateurs in music and other leisure activities, describes this as ‘value

commitment', which gives amateurs the freedom of choice to pursue an activity, as opposed to the 'continuance commitment' which might drive a professional musician to stay in a job they no longer enjoy (Stebbins, 1992: 52). These differences were demonstrated in Juniu, Tedrick and Boyd's (1996) study of amateur and professional musicians, which found differences in motivation and satisfaction in rehearsals between the two groups: those musicians who categorised rehearsals as 'work', who tended to be the professional musicians, found rehearsals to be stressful and tedious, while those who perceived their musical involvement as 'leisure' found freedom, fun and satisfaction in rehearsing (p. 54). Both groups were motivated by the 'thrills and rewards' of performance (p. 55), so demonstrating how rehearsing and performing are quite distinct elements of participation, with the satisfaction of playing to a responsive audience offering some compensation for those who find rehearsals less rewarding.

By the logic of 'value commitment' (Stebbins, 1992), there are no unhappy amateurs, since those who no longer value their involvement will leave their performing group, either seeking out another ensemble that better suits their needs, or ceasing their musical activities altogether. Evans, McPherson and Davidson (2013) describe a similar phenomenon in relation to children and adolescents who give up learning instruments: using a psychological needs model (Deci & Ryan, 2000) they demonstrate how young people who ceased musical participation 'felt greater feelings of needs inhibition and fewer feelings of need fulfilment' (Evans et al., 2013: 612). Playing music that was too challenging, or insufficiently challenging, was equally problematic, as were the conflicting demands of school work and the effects on band membership on friendships in and out of the ensemble. The authors conclude that 'the biggest implication of this research for music educators and parents is to challenge and rethink the assumption that any kind of music participation is necessarily good for the child' (p. 614).

In this project, we challenged similar assumptions in relation to adults, seeking out lapsed members of performing groups who might have a different perspective to offer on musical participation, having decided or been compelled by their circumstances to cease their musical involvement for a period of time. Through case studies with two performing groups and interviews with five of their past and current members, we aimed to address the following research questions, and to consider how our findings might inform the recruitment and retention strategies of amateur musical groups:

1. What are the factors that cause adults to continue or cease their musical participation?
2. How is musical participation viewed by those who choose to give up or are no longer able to participate?
3. What can the experiences of former participants offer to an understanding of musical participation?

Research methods and contexts

This project had a gradually evolving design, as the research interests of the three authors increasingly overlapped, leading us to seek opportunities to explore these intersections in a shared project. Two initial case studies of amateur performing groups were carried out between April and August 2013 by Katy Robinson and Kunshan Goh, under the supervision of Stephanie Pitts, as the dissertation component of a Masters in music psychology. The two studies used different methods and theoretical frameworks (outlined below), but arrived at broadly similar conclusions, so allowing us to evaluate the usefulness of different methodological approaches in this field of research. We identified common interests between these two initial studies in understanding when and why people cease their musical involvement: what the factors are in that decision, what people feel to have lost and gained

when they leave a performing group, and how an understanding of their experience might help to retain and nurture future members of the ensemble. To pursue these questions further, we worked in collaboration on a follow-up study, returning to the two case study ensembles and asking for their help in contacting past members, five of whom were interviewed by Katy Robinson in January 2014.

All stages of the study were reviewed and approved according to the University of Sheffield's ethics policy: all participants gave informed consent for the recording and use of their data, and pseudonyms were assigned to all organisations and participants. The methods and participants for the three stages of the project were as follows:

Case study 1: Griffin Concert Band

This case study formed part of a larger investigation of musical participation through the lifespan, which used Maslow's (1943; 1954) hierarchy of needs to explore the contribution of music to self-actualisation, self-esteem and belonging. The chosen method was semi-structured focus group interviews, selected in preference to individual interviews in order to create the sense of a conversation between friends and colleagues (Morgan, 1997), and so to emulate the ways in which ensemble members interact with each other during and outside rehearsals. Focus groups took place before or after a regular rehearsal, in the same venue, so providing an environment that was comfortable and familiar to the participants. The main questions covered topics including a typical rehearsal of the ensemble, personal motivations for making music, and wider musical activities outside the ensemble, with the schedule being flexible enough to accommodate new or dominant topics of discussion.

The Griffin Concert Band (GCB) was representative in the wider study of a mid-adulthood group, with an average member age of 45 years, and an entry requirement of Grade 5 in the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) or equivalent

performance exams, but no audition. Their membership is drawn from the band's town and surrounding region, being a non-university town in the North Midlands of England. The band was founded in 2001 and its website describes it as a 'community wind band' of around 30 players, covering a range of ages and professions, and performing repertoire 'ranging from marches, selections from musicals, film music, solos and contemporary works for wind band to satisfy all musical tastes'. GCB gives regular local and charity concerts and has been on several concert tour trips to Europe. Their conductor since 2012 is a recent music graduate; a trumpeter who also conducts several other ensembles.

Sixteen members of the band took part in the focus group and their discussion prioritised themes of group belonging and shared performance goals, enjoyment of rehearsals and performances, and the sense of emotional stability provided by band membership, which was portrayed by several participants as an escape from the pressures of work or family life.

Case study 2: Valleyside Orchestra

For this study, the methods of participant observation, questionnaire and interview were selected to give an immersive account of a single musical group, selected because of its focus as a 'development' ensemble, open to late starters and returners to orchestral playing. The research focused on the learning strategies of adult musicians, and so gleaned information on approaches to practice, motivations to participate, and competing pressures in the lives of ensemble members.

Founded in 1977, Valleyside Orchestra (VO) rehearses weekly and gives three concerts a year, conducted by an experienced local musician and teacher who has been with the ensemble since 2005. Like GCB, the orchestra has an entry level of Grade 5, but describes itself on its website as providing 'a friendly and relaxed atmosphere for amateur players [...] particularly lapsed amateurs and those who are new to orchestral playing and performing'.

Membership is drawn mainly from the university city in which the orchestra is based, and includes a high proportion of professionals working in health or education, as well as retired or voluntary workers. The average age of participants in the study was 49.5 years, with a range from 24 to 71 years amongst the current membership of 62 players.

Participant observation was arranged through initial contact with the orchestra's conductor, outlining the research aims and making a request to join the cello section of the orchestra. This method has a long tradition in ethnomusicology (Barz & Cooley, 2008) as one which allows researchers to 'partially share the diverse social experiences of the people with whom they work' (Berger, 2008: 71). Less commonly used in music psychology, participant observation offers helpful triangulation (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011: 195) with data gathered using other methods, in this case questionnaires and interviews.

After attending several rehearsals and beginning informal conversations with members, Kunshan distributed a questionnaire – available online and in paper copy – to the orchestra's members, receiving 29 fully completed responses. The questionnaire covered topics including respondents' musical background and playing experience, their motivations for engaging in music, including any past lapses in their participation, and their learning processes and strategies in rehearsals and private practice. These topics were then explored further in individual interviews with 13 of the questionnaire respondents, as well as with the orchestra's conductor and its professional leader (first violinist).

For this ensemble, the strongest themes in their discussion were their commitment to playing and their sense of making musical progress, individually and as a group. Respondents also emphasised the friendliness of the ensemble, and the enjoyment of being part of a musical activity that was 'greater than the sum of its parts'.

Follow-up interviews

For the follow-up study, we worked together to compare the findings of the two case studies and conduct further investigation of participants' reasons for and experiences of ceasing musical involvement. Having employed a range of methods in the two case studies, we selected individual interviews as being most appropriate for the sensitive discussions that might arise in relation to people's circumstances and decisions around stopping playing. We contacted the conductors of Griffin Concert Band and Valleyside Orchestra to outline the aims of our follow-up study, and to ask for their help in recruiting potential interviewees, from amongst current members who had experienced a gap in their playing in the past, and former members who were still in contact with the ensemble.

Five volunteers contacted us, and individual interviews were carried out with them, following a semi-structured schedule which included questions on players' childhood involvement in music, their adult experiences of belonging to ensembles, and the reasons and experiences surrounding their decision to cease playing. We also asked about the benefits of musical participation as they saw them when they were involved, how those views changed subsequently, and whether other activities had replaced the gains of musical involvement during the years when they were no longer playing. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the participants were allocated a pseudonym, the code FI to denote follow-up interview, and ensemble initials (GCB or VO) to indicate their current or former membership. Data gathered through the case studies is coded similarly in the discussion that follows, with the source indicated as an interview (I), questionnaire (Q) or focus group (FG).

Aims and analytical approach

Having outlined the three stages of our data collection, our focus for analysis in this article will be on the indicators and experiences of ceasing participation that were revealed in the data, including the views of current members about the drawbacks and challenges of

ensemble membership, and those of past members about how and why they decided to cease participation. While this focus risks presenting a more negative portrayal of musical participation than is representative of participants' overall experience (and is more usually reported in the research literature; e.g. Pitts, 2005; Finnegan, 2007), it will become clear that decisions about withdrawing from an ensemble are not made lightly, and the positive value of musical participation is revealed in the sense of loss and regret expressed by former members. Even continuing members are constantly, even if not consciously, weighing up the benefits and costs of participation, with the summer break in rehearsals, for example, providing a natural pause for this reflection. Our investigations reveal the continuum from temporary breaks in rehearsing, through drifting into non-participation, to a considered or enforced decision to stop permanently.

The themes in the discussion below are drawn from the data from current and past members of the two case study ensembles, and illustrate how the balance between enjoying participation and needing to stop can be tipped by family circumstances, personal doubts and musical disappointments. Our five interviewees from the follow-up study all presented different profiles as lapsed or returning players, and so we have taken those profiles as the starting point for our analysis, weaving the broader evidence from the case studies into the narratives of the follow-up interviews, in order to give a rich, qualitative description of a range of experiences of ceasing participation. After discussing the evidence in the section that follows, we will review the implications of our findings for promoting and sustaining musical participation, and for articulating the benefits of amateur music-making to a wider audience in times of financial and political uncertainty for the arts.

Thematic discussion: five stories of dropping in and dropping out

Steve (FI-GCB): the enthusiastic returner

Like all of our interviewees and many of the case study participants, Steve (now in his early sixties) had begun his musical involvement with classroom recorder lessons in primary school, progressing after a couple of years to the school band where he was allocated a “very shiny, very interesting-looking” French horn. Lessons provided through the school led to membership of the county youth orchestra, where Steve describes “being absolutely blown away by the sound of the orchestra when I first sat in it”. When the time came to leave school and return his hired instrument, his music teacher invited him to keep it, and for the next few years continued to involve Steve in school performances. When the horn was eventually given back to the school, “that was the end of my playing career at that time because I just could not afford to do anything about it” – and because work, voluntary activities and “going out and having a good time” meant that “music was starting to take a bit of a back seat at that point”.

The factors that Steve’s story highlights are by no means unusual: a supportive music teacher and instrumental tutor providing encouragement and opportunities, positive experiences of playing in youth ensembles, and a resigned acceptance of an end to playing after school years, as priorities and circumstances changed. Other respondents from the case studies report similar experiences of losing access to an instrument – “moved away from home (no piano)” (Carl, Q-VO) – or of stopping playing at the start of university or working life: “when I joined university, study and going out took priority and I rarely played my violin as didn’t wish to disturb housemates” (Vanessa, Q-VO).

Several decades later, Steve was visiting a military exhibition in London when he saw the army band’s instruments set out on tables and asked to try the French horn. He described how he “made a horrible noise, and walked away saying ‘no, never ever going to happen’”. It was another ten years before he had “an eBay moment” and persuaded himself that he had sufficient time and disposable income to make the purchase that had been out of his reach

when he handed back the school French horn: “And so I started playing again and found that after a week or so, it was a bit like riding a bike; I got some play along CDs and started with those”.

At all stages of his narrative, Steve played down the effort and commitment involved in his musical activities, though he did describe both his adult and teenage involvement as “immersive”, giving this account of his school practising routine: “I’d been given this opportunity and I’d decided I was going to give it a go – every single lunch time I was practising, and every night I was practising, you know, I completely immersed myself in it”. From his membership of ensembles as a teenager he valued “being able to participate in creating something”, recalling strong friendships as well as the satisfying challenges of shared musical goals. After his “eBay moment”, Steve searched for ensembles to join in his local area, and at the time of his interview was a member of two wind bands, an orchestra, a wind quintet and several octets, as well as being on the organising committee of the orchestra. He describes his adult involvement in musical terms, though the social side is still clearly important: “I think that I probably have a better appreciation of what we’re supposed to be trying to achieve out of the music [...] I’ve been fixated on making sure the sounds have come out [...] but now I’m starting to progress in my own ability, I think, to make it more musical”.

Steve’s story is striking in the high value that he ascribes to musical participation, despite his lapse of around thirty years in playing music himself. His greatest regret is “not having carried on forever [...] I think by now I would have been such a phenomenal player!” – and even a return “ten years sooner when I had that first encounter” would have enabled him to spend more years pursuing his “absolute passion”. The effort and enthusiasm of his teenage participation appears to have provided a strong foundation to return to in adult life, giving Steve not just the musical and technical facility needed for ensemble membership, but

the sense of purpose in playing music with other people. Steve's narrative is a clear example of how latent musical identity can be revived later in life once other family, work and social demands have been fulfilled – but it also raises questions over the potentially greater benefits of sustaining participation alongside those demands, with Steve showing retrospective regret for his 'lost' years as a musician.

Brian (FI-VO): the reluctant retiree

Brian's musical life history began with a recorder and a baby grand piano in the home, both of which he learnt to play "in his own way". Music lessons in school were minimal, but an enthusiastic choir master "insisted" that the whole school sang an oratorio every year. Also a member of the Methodist church choir, the congruent skills and values of home and school music made participation a normal part of Brian's everyday life, in common with others of this post-retirement generation (Pitts, 2012), including some of the case study respondents: Julia (I-VO), for example, described how music was "very much part of things" in her family, with a piano in the home, trips to concerts with parents, and relatives who "always sang in choirs", as well as at church and around the piano at Christmas.

Brian's involvement in music while studying another subject at university consisted of building his own record player and listening repeatedly to classical records, from which he "learnt about harmony [...] and instrumentation, to some extent". Beginning a career in teacher training, Brian glossed modestly over the fact that he was at this time playing the piano for school assemblies and having oboe lessons: "I think I might have been a member of a choir by then; I was in several orchestras, the polytechnic orchestra and something else, playing oboe – second oboe, always second oboe, never first!" This tendency to play down considerable involvement in music was not uncommon: the majority of the Valleyside Orchestra respondents were or had been members of other ensembles, and for those who have

the time, it seems that variety and quantity of ensemble playing are part of the pleasure of being an active amateur musician, illustrating Stebbins' (1992) 'value commitment' in the ongoing search for new musical challenges.

As his own children became interested in music, Brian became a role model for their practice routines, deciding "there's two ways, you can bully [them] or you can demonstrate". His own habit was to "[practise] diligently, half an hour in the morning and another twenty minutes at night – much to [the family's] annoyance because I wouldn't give up" – another example of how Brian integrated a strong commitment to music with the demands of work and family life. Two of his children subsequently gave up their instruments, but his now adult son still plays and sings, and having "music in the family" is clearly a source of pride to Brian. Others in the Valleyside Orchestra case study spoke similarly of having "helped all three of my children to practise piano and one orchestral instrument each" (Agnes, Q-VO) and gained satisfaction from "watching all five of my children play very expertly in the [youth orchestra] and feeling proud that they have stuck at it and practised" (Iris, Q-VO). The cycle of influencing and being influenced by children's instrumental learning had also prompted some members to return to playing once their children began practising in the home: Quinn (Q-VO) "restarted when [his] daughter started lessons" and Rachel (Q-VO) "as [her] children grew up, took up violin again and had lessons with university music students".

The effects of children's music learning on adults' participation varied between respondents: for some, childcare demands proved to be an obstacle to ensemble membership, while for others rehearsals were a welcome escape – "I have four children and it's good to get out" (Frank, Q-VO). Female respondents were more likely to refer to the challenge of "trying to keep it up when having small children and a job" (Heather, Q-VO) or to see their absence as inevitable during those years; however, this was by no means a universal decision, and for some the ensemble had provided valuable social continuity while "adjusting to

motherhood” (Kate, Q-VO). Jenny (FI-VO), whose story follows later in this section, described her current playing as “not regular because of having a baby – but that’s an excuse, to be fair, I could get out more!”: this slightly guilty response perhaps sums up the balancing of responsibility to the family and the ensemble, which tips different ways for different participants, according to their circumstances and commitments.

Returning to Brian’s story, his decision to cease playing was an enforced one due to declining health, and he spoke with regret of his shortage of breath and his fingers slowing down: “I can play with this [hand] okay, but this one is rather slow, and you can’t do it with a wind instrument”. Brian described how he felt “ashamed of [himself]” in ensembles as he perceived his skills to be declining, but the regret expressed by the conductors as he resigned his membership suggests that he made an early decision to withdraw from performance. Although he now views himself as a former player, Brian is still musically active, teaching piano and conducting a brass group, and he expressed contentment with his current level of involvement, saying that “habits change as you get older”. Although concert attendance has become frustrating because of his hearing aids – “if I take them out I can’t hear and if I leave them in it’s too loud” – being in the audience for his former ensembles bring the social pleasure of being recognised and welcomed, so keeping an element of the “being part” that he enjoyed as a player.

Making a contribution is clearly important to Brian, who summed up his current musical activity by saying that “it pleases me immensely to do this work, because I actually loved teaching, and it means I’m being useful”. In this evaluation of his current activity, he illustrates the careful balancing of personal satisfaction and social responsibility that underpins his story, from being a paternal role model to leaving an ensemble in which he no longer felt himself to be making his best musical contribution. Across the narratives in this study, a sense of pride and self-evaluation emerge as components of musical identity,

explaining both the affirmation that belonging to an ensemble can bring, and the self-doubt that causes others to cease participation.

Jenny (FI-VO): the stressed withdrawer

The youngest of our Valleyside Orchestra interviewees, in her early thirties, Jenny stated early in the conversation that “I’d love to still be playing really, but I’m not”. Like the other VO members, she had begun her musical career on the recorder, then progressed to the flute, supported by a mother who was a “better yourself” kind of woman” and encouraged Jenny and her siblings through instrumental lessons and membership of a community wind band. Jenny recalled being “conditioned to cope with the anxiety of [performing] from an early age”, suggesting that her musical experiences had not always been pleasurable, though she spoke fondly of the community band she played in as a teenager. Asked about her motivation for joining school ensembles, she stated that she “didn’t really remember having a choice, but definitely enjoyed it”, so showing less of the drive to participate expressed by Steve (FI-GCB) and Brian (FI-VO), and perhaps prefiguring her later withdrawal from musical activity.

Jenny laughed as she described the standard of the orchestra that she joined at university, saying that she “and the lad next to me were the worst in the orchestra, but no one cared [...] I once played an entire wrong piece and nobody even noticed!” Her past playing was clearly recalled as a source of fun and pleasure, but perhaps not something in which she had invested the time and practice described by other respondents. In her admission that “I’m quite confident and bluffy, which got me through”, there are precursors of what Jenny calls her “musical breakdown”, as a more superficial level of skill- and technique-building in adolescence appears to have left Jenny with fewer resources to draw upon in her adult participation compared, for example, with Steve (FI-GCB) and his “immersive” practice routine while at school. While Jenny did say that she and friends used to take home the

music from their concert band, she described this as “a bit geeky”, where more goal-oriented musicians would have considered this a normal part of ensemble membership. Theories of motivation in musical activity (e.g. O’Neill & McPherson, 2002) would support this conjecture, as the high level of self-critique and intrinsic drive required for sustained investment in instrumental study is largely absent from Jenny’s story, which displays instead the maladaptive tendency to avoid challenge and seek enjoyment within an existing skill level.

Consistent with this analysis, Jenny’s disillusionment with playing came when the standards and demands of the Valleyside Orchestra began to outweigh the commitment that she was willing and able to give. Her reasons for leaving the orchestra included the demanding rehearsal schedule, including a requirement to rehearse on public holidays that she refused, “because I think when you work full time, days like that are really precious”. Jenny took several breaks from the orchestra before deciding to leave completely when she felt increasingly that “you’re either in the orchestra or out” – an “all or nothing” approach similar to Brian’s (FI-VO) response to his health problems. Alongside Jenny’s stated musical reasons for leaving, however, she reports suffering a family bereavement and beginning a stressful job, both of which caused her to lose the sense of “escapism” that the orchestra had previously offered. As the stress of her personal life reached a “colliding point” with the demands of rehearsals, Jenny withdrew from the orchestra, reporting how “for many, many Mondays I’d feel a bit bereft, like ‘this is when I’d normally be going to rehearsals’”. Jenny’s story is an example of musical participation becoming more costly than beneficial to wellbeing, though she still feels “sad” about its loss and has considered joining other, “easier” orchestras, admitting that “I’ve definitely still got a hang up about it – and yet at the same time, miss it”.

Jenny described a loss of musical confidence, exacerbated but not attributed by her to her health and stress problems, in which she became increasingly concerned that she was “letting people down” through her playing: “Everyone else is playing and practising really hard, and if you screw up your bit, you let the entire orchestra down”. Her self-consciousness as a musician was evident in her description of tuning up at the start of rehearsals: “I always feel that everyone’s listening to you, and everyone’s listening for whether you’ve noticed if you’re in tune or not”. Finding herself out of her depth in the orchestra, Jenny appeared to have doubted her earlier musical achievements, describing how her first instrumental lessons were “on the cheap from a person down the road”, and pointing out deficiencies in her sight-reading skills. In re-telling her musical story to fit with her changed circumstances as a lapsed player, Jenny illustrates how musical identity is vulnerable to levels of self-confidence and the need for affirmation by others: the same story might be told by someone else as a temporary clash of external pressures and commitments, still open to resolution in the future, but for Jenny the sequence of events had caused a complete reappraisal of herself as a musician (cf. Bluck & Habermas, 2000).

Jenny’s sense of stress and self-consciousness in the orchestra was by no means unique, as several other respondents reported finding their first rehearsal “more challenging than I could manage” (Julia, I-VO), or finding it “hard and frustrating when I can’t play something” (Rachel, I-VO). For continuing players, these stresses were balanced by the satisfaction of being aware of their playing improving over time, or experiencing the support of other players and the conductor in gaining confidence as a member of the ensemble. Some had previously sought out groups better suited to their level of ability and commitment, recognising that the problem was in their “fit” to the ensemble as much as their own musical limitations. The difference in whether these musical struggles led to continuing or ceasing playing appeared to be a personal one, as the experience of musical participation intersected

with other aspects of daily life, providing enrichment or escape for some people, but additional pressure for others like Jenny. Despite the emotional distress of her final months in the orchestra, Jenny still articulated – and missed – the positive experience of musical participation, so illustrating the fine line between the costs and benefits of playing music: “when you’re all playing together and a tune comes out of what you’re all doing [...] I don’t think there’s anything like it on earth”.

Laura (FI-GCB): the tired outsider

The now familiar story of playing recorder in primary school and progressing to clarinet lessons and the school orchestra was Laura’s introduction to music-making, supported by a father who “tried instruments” himself once his daughter had begun lessons. As she began her working life she joined a local wind band, seeking out a new ensemble when she re-located for work, and giving both musical and social reasons for continuing playing: “to play my clarinet, and I suppose to get to know other people around here; for the experience, for the fun of playing an instrument”. At face value, this seems to be an example of someone wanting to maintain their existing level of skill on an instrument and to use this for social networking outside work: the narrative of “improving” playing reported by Steve (FI-GCB) and a high proportion of VO questionnaire respondents was not a priority for Laura, who sought out a friendly ensemble to join and avoided bands where “it was quite formal and you have to do an audition”.

Given the social expectations that Laura brought to her band membership, she expressed understandable disappointment on finding that “some of [the members] were welcoming but they already had all their friends, you know”. She speculated that this is a common problem amongst amateur musicians, stating that “I’ve never found them particularly socially outgoing [...] maybe musicians are quite shy in general because they

express themselves through their music”. Laura found the coffee breaks “never very easy” and although she “got on quite well with the people [she] sat next to”, the ensemble clearly failed in its intended function of helping her to meet people in her new location.

Interestingly, other case study respondents made no mention of the coffee breaks in rehearsals, though both groups included this feature: perhaps these breaks become significant only when they feel awkward or uncomfortable, but are otherwise taken for granted. One respondent described the Valleyside Orchestra as being “much more friendly than other groups I’ve played in elsewhere” (Faith, Q-VO), supporting Laura’s view that friendliness is not an automatic feature of making music together; however, another Griffin Concert Band member suggested that “musical people are mostly, generally, friendly people, and you can walk in and you belong” (Jane, FG-GCB). Like Laura, some other respondents had used ensemble membership as a way of connecting with a new location, as was the case when Phil (FG-GCB) “went to Australia and spent a few months there, and I was able to join a band and it gave me a social life out there as well as the working”. It seems that Laura’s expectation of finding “company and camaraderie” (Iris, Q-VO) in an ensemble is widely shared, but that most members find this mainly through the collective musical effort, rather than the interludes between playing: “It can be sociable though without having to talk to people, ‘cos you’re busy playing!” (Sarah, FG-GCB).

Laura’s feelings of being on the outside of the ensemble were exacerbated by her tiredness and “watching the clock” during rehearsals, realising over a period of time that Friday night rehearsals were “not necessarily putting me in the best mood or leaving me with enough energy to enjoy the weekend”. Throughout Laura’s account of her reasons for leaving the ensemble, musical reasons were intertwined with external circumstances, so that it is unclear whether changes to the night and length of the rehearsal, or the sociability of other band members, would necessarily have encouraged her to stay – or conversely, whether

with better health and different relationship status she might have enjoyed rehearsals more. Some case study respondents had used their ensemble membership to help them through comparably difficult situations, including one sufferer of depression, who talked openly of how “sometimes mum has to absolutely drag me out [of] the flat by my ear but you get here and it all goes right and you just relax and your brain fills up again” (Duncan, FG-GCB).

Whether participation is helpful to people in difficult circumstances appears to vary between individuals, but is perhaps more likely when other band members (like Duncan’s mum) are aware of its potentially restorative function and can help to ensure this need is met.

Laura ended her interview by offering another factor to consider in understanding why people cease participation: “another thing that’s quite significant in how people can participate is where they live, so hopefully you’ll take that into account, because I don’t feel like I live close enough to [a big city] to go there in the evening, and round here there’s not very much”. Laura was right that quantity and diversity of opportunities was more represented in the city-based Valleyside Orchestra responses, and had led Adrian (I-VO) to offer the advice that “if you can’t find something which is the right level [...], ask around, cause there’s loads of music at every level”. For players like Laura, who perceived a shortage of opportunities, failing to find a good “fit” with an available ensemble was more of a problem than for those people who had tried several different groups until settling on the one that best met their musical and social needs.

Mary (FI-VO): the contented reminiscer

Mary’s story begins with a father who played records loudly on a Sunday morning, also taking her to concerts, and encouraging her playing of the recorder in primary school and later the piano. Now in her early seventies, Mary recalled singing in the school choir, then joining her college Gilbert and Sullivan society, while her playing career began with seeing

an advert in the post office for a clarinet costing £16. Her approach to learning was participatory from the outset: “I didn’t have any lessons at that time – I can’t imagine why I didn’t – but I somehow managed to join an orchestra, and I was helped by another clarinettist, and the conductor was very good as well”. Lessons did follow after college, and Mary then joined a music evening class, and later the same polytechnic orchestra mentioned by Brian (FI-VO). Like Laura (FI-GCB), Mary looked for an ensemble to join on moving to a new city, for both musical and social reasons: “I just enjoyed really being in the whole business of contributing to something that sounded reasonably nice; being part of a new group, making friends, that sort of thing”. There were further similarities in her dislike of feeling exposed in the ensemble: content in her position as second clarinet, she found that “if the first clarinet was off and I had to do it, I really hated it, and I got extremely nervous”.

Mary’s reasons for leaving the Valleyside Orchestra, about four years ago, were a combination of the age-related declining health mentioned by Brian (FI-VO) and the feelings of being below standard reported by Jenny (FI-VO): “it crept up on me, really, that I wasn’t doing the orchestra any good, and that it would be much nicer if they had a better second clarinettist [...] another reason was that I can’t easily drive in the dark, so evening things [were] too difficult”. Like Laura (FI-GCB), Mary balanced musical and personal reasons in her account, but unlike the other lapsed players, she seemed content with her decision and had enjoyed staying in touch with ensemble members and attending the orchestra’s concerts. At her final rehearsal, she had launched the idea of a ‘Friends of the Orchestra’ scheme, though noted that this had never grown above seven or eight members. As an audience member, she now “love[s] to sit at the front [and] see how the whole orchestra works, you know, from the other side”, so drawing on her past experience of playing in her new phase of musical engagement as a listener. This contrasts with Steve (FI-GCB), who rarely listened

deliberately to classical music while not playing it, and Jenny (FI-VO), who was “too traumatised [...] to listen” after losing her confidence as a performer.

Mary’s only expression of regret came in her descriptions of attempting to play more recently, and finding that “I’ve completely lost that skill”: she described how when trying to pick out Christmas carols on a toy keyboard, “I could barely get the intervals right, and I had no idea what to do with my left hand at all”. Like Brian (FI-VO), there is an element of pride in not wanting to do things badly: Mary described feeling “a real twit” on that occasion, and would “just feel too silly” if she attempted to play chamber music with friends. Losing musical and technical skill with age is clearly a factor in older members deciding to leave ensembles, and other case study respondents noted or anticipated their own mental and physical deterioration: “as I get older, memory changes and it’s more difficult for things to stick” (Rachel, Q-VO) and “my left arm and neck can get painful if I practise for too long” (Elaine, Q-VO). Hearing loss was also mentioned by several, and Mary was not alone in attributing this to ensemble playing: “some years back we had a very, very loud trumpeter, and one day I actually heard something happen in my ear, with the result that I actually lost one frequency in my hearing”. With an average age of 49.5 years amongst the Valleyside Orchestra case study respondents, the ensemble was unusual in not having a predominantly retired membership, so offering opportunities to “learn to work together with a wide range of people of different ages, abilities and personalities” (Kate, Q-VO). It is possible, however, that this made the ageing process more noticeable to former members like Brian (FI-VO) and Mary, increasing their fears that other players would be intolerant of their declining skills.

Mary was unusual amongst the interviewees in having an answer for our question about whether anything had replaced her musical involvement: “the only sort of main thing is that I’m a potter; I’ve got my own little workshop”. She described opening her workshop to visitors as a way of gaining the social satisfaction previously associated with her music-

making: “I do like social interaction of one kind or another [...] sharing interests, you know, people are interested enough to come [and] I can talk to them in that way”. Pottery offered “a bit of creativity in my life”, and combined with “fairly eclectic” listening tastes to give Mary an apparent state of contentment in her post-playing years: she described how at orchestra concerts “I don’t yearn for it or feel awkward or anything, not at all”. Her life story shows both the positive and negative effects of ageing as an amateur musician, as declining skill and dexterity is counterbalanced by the sustained pleasure that memories of and contact with ensembles still provides (see Creech et al., 2014).

Conclusions and future directions

The narratives of ceasing and resuming playing that we have reported here illustrate the many demands, challenges and satisfactions involved in maintaining musical participation as an adult. The profiles of the ‘enthusiastic returner’, ‘reluctant retiree’, ‘stressed withdrawer’, ‘tired outsider’ and ‘contented reminiscer’ show how the purely musical aspects of the experience intersect with confidence, personality, emotional and social needs, as well as with the obstacles of everyday life. Reasons for ceasing participation related most often to a feeling of poor ‘fit’ with the ensemble, with a perceived decline or inadequacy of musical contribution often closely linked to a player’s health or wellbeing. The most contented players appeared to be those who were confident that their playing was ‘good enough’ for the ensemble, seeking not musical perfection or glory, but a sense of belonging and collective development that used and improved their existing skills. This theory of the ‘good enough’ contribution has been used in parenting (Winnicott, 1960), teaching (Swanwick, 2008) and even international policy-making (Grindle, 2007), but is less often applied to musical participation, where discourses of improvement and ideal performance are more commonplace, but are shown here to be in conflict with the needs and capacities of some

adult participants. Using the ‘good enough’ framework to acknowledge and articulate the range of musical goals outside the ‘perfect’ performance could therefore be a valuable tool for sustaining participation in adult ensembles.

A summary of the musical, social and personal factors in participation decisions is shown in Table 1, and illustrates the way in which different ensemble members reacted to similar experiences in positive or negative ways, depending on the combination of factors and the individual’s ability to cope with balancing the demands and rewards of participation.

Table 1: Factors in ceasing and continuing musical participation

Factors in ceasing musical participation	MUSICAL	PERSONAL	SOCIAL	Factors in continuing musical participation
Concerns about own standard of playing				Security of ‘good enough’ playing
Not enjoying repertoire or own part in it				Finding an ensemble that confirms or broadens musical preferences
Nerves or anxiety around performance				Enjoyment and confidence in performance
Pressure of other commitments				Escape from other commitments
Rehearsals as tiring experiences				Rehearsals as energising experiences
Family responsibilities as obstacle to participation				Family responsibilities as motivation to practice and participate
Finding ensemble unfriendly or unwelcoming				Enjoying friendship and camaraderie of rehearsals
Health problems as an obstacle to participation				Playing as a source of respite from health problems
Concerns about declining health and its effects on technique				Playing as a way of staying young and active

Striking in Table 1 is the small proportion of factors that are specifically musical (indicated by shaded columns) – however, the qualitative data show these to be amongst the most influential factors, even if the least numerous. While other studies have emphasised the social benefits of participation (e.g. Pitts, 2005; Southcott, 2009), this research shows that positive social effects can flourish only when a sense of musical security is established: the

like-mindedness and friendliness of an ensemble might be experienced as a social factor, but is manifest through the shared endeavour of playing, to which each member must contribute effectively if they are to feel truly part of the group. It also demonstrates the blurred boundaries between self-actualisation and self-esteem, acknowledged by Maslow (1943), as musical participants critique their own playing and make assumptions about how others view their contribution, able to feel a sense of belonging only when these two are mutually affirming.

The formally constituted ensembles of classical and band repertoires represented here make the self-evaluative features of musical participation particularly acute, but studies of apparently more informal settings, like the folk club, have shown how the social politics of belonging are just as closely aligned with musical competence and acceptance even when the rules of participation are less strongly articulated (Hield, 2013). In exploring the distinction between ‘participatory’ and ‘presentational’ music-making, Turino (2008) draws on global musical practices to show the different prioritising of social and musical goals in different contexts, noting however that an inclusive ethos does not mean a lack of peer evaluation: ‘It is not that people do not make qualitative judgements about other participants’ performance inwardly or that everyone is happy about problematic contributions to a performance – overall, people have a better time when the music and dance are going well’ (p. 35). The notion of ‘value commitment’ (Stebbins, 1992) perhaps needs refining to include the sense to which participants themselves feel valued within the ensemble, as well as the extent to which it fulfils their own musical, social and personal needs.

Our final research question considered the implications of our findings for those who direct and organise musical ensembles, for whom there might be useful lessons in the experiences of past members and their perceptions of the difficulties of sustaining musical participation. The role of the conductor was certainly important to the case study

respondents, who reported the value of encouraging and fair feedback on their playing, confirming the musical and psychological responsibilities of ensemble directors in nurturing their players (Durrant, 2005). Music educator Jackie Wiggins (2011) writes of how ‘vulnerability’ is at once essential and detrimental to musical identity, generating both the drive to pursue challenging, creative goals, and the fear that these will fail publically and result in humiliation. The concerns expressed by our respondents, that when “everyone’s listening to you” (Jenny, FI-VO) a player “might not be doing [things] properly” (Brian, FI-VO), illustrates the strength of this vulnerability and the responsibility that players have towards one another, with the help of the conductor, to provide a supportive environment in which to take musical risks and make progress. Our interviewees also showed how personal vulnerabilities, such as moving house or coping with illness, can themselves be a motivation to join an ensemble, so heightening its social impact and leaving players more sensitive to feelings of belonging and rejection. While conductors may well consider that this pastoral care is beyond their remit, the need to question the assumption that participation is necessarily good for people, noted in Evans et al.’s (2013) study of teenage musicians, perhaps suggests that stronger peer mentoring within ensembles would be beneficial.

A further consideration in supporting and retaining players relates to the articulation of goals, both for the ensemble as a whole and for individual members. The importance of ‘fit’ to the ensemble was clear in the accounts of both satisfied and disengaged players, and yet establishing this matching of musical and personal needs was something that could take time and result in difficult or demoralising experiences. Joining an ensemble expecting a fun, social interaction, and then finding it to be strongly focused on performance goals, for instance, had been a source of frustration for several lapsed players; similarly, expecting musical challenge and finding an over-emphasis on socialising could lead to equivalent disappointment for someone motivated by improving their playing amongst like-minded

people. The way that an ensemble attracts and recruits its members is one route to ensuring mutually shared values: Valleyside Orchestra, for example, presents itself as a development orchestra, but its collective improvement over the years has made that function less readily apparent to new members, and while this is musically admirable, it reportedly created a sense of inadequacy for players who could no longer cope with the pace and challenge of rehearsals. An overly-modest player who thought that a development orchestra suited their needs but then became bored with those same rehearsals would also need to examine their motives more carefully. Structuring rehearsals and providing feedback that allows all players to feel valued and to make a contribution is certainly a challenge, but the questioning of traditional ways of organising people and resources to make music could be a worthwhile endeavour.

The implications for future research address similar areas: further investigation is needed into why making music in adulthood is difficult or prohibitive, as well as satisfying, in order to balance the claims for its benefits with an understanding of what makes it problematic. This study and others on musical life histories (Pitts, 2012; Smilde, 2009) have shown how the foundations for lifelong participation are rooted in family encouragement of music, opportunities provided in schools and communities, and in the attitudes, as well as the skills, acquired in those formative years. Longitudinal research, particularly through the years of early adulthood in which participation is most threatened by changes in non-musical circumstances and commitments, would help to explore how musical priorities and engagement change over time, and what strategies might be deployed to increase the likelihood of sustaining musical involvement. To acknowledge that musical participation is not necessary or beneficial for everyone (cf. Evans et al., 2013) is a healthy and realistic starting point for these enquiries, but nonetheless, a clearer sense of how music-making can

be sustained throughout the lifespan, and what it contributes at its best, can only help to strengthen the place of music in education and society.

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