**Classical music after #MeToo: Is music higher education a ‘conducive context’ for sexual misconduct?**

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**Abstract**

This chapter explores sexual misconduct in higher music education institutions in the UK in the context of the neoliberal marketisation of higher education. It focuses on classical music, as this genre historically and today is dominant in higher music education. It draws on Liz Kelly’s theorisation of the ‘conducive context’ to examine factors that create a context that enables sexual misconduct and harassment to occur in classical music higher education, most notably institutionalised power and authority, gendered power relations, and limited external challenges to institutionalised authority. After outlining ways forward for institutions in addressing this issue, the argument is made that the theorisation of the ‘conducive context’ allows similarities and patterns to become visible across sites where sexual misconduct occurs, against arguments for classical music’s exceptionalism.

**Keywords:** sexual harassment, sexual misconduct, classical music, higher education, conservatoires, conducive context, gender inequality, power, authority

# **Introduction**

Despite high-profile sexual harassment scandals (e.g. Stewart and Cooper, 2020), it has been argued that in classical music, #MeToo has led to less of a reckoning than in many other industries (Madonna, 2019). Higher music education institutions, which historically and to some extent today have been dominated by classical music, have also seen only a limited amount of scrutiny. Nevertheless, there is plenty of evidence that sexual harassment and misconduct – often teachers targeting students, as well as bullying and emotional abuse (Bull, 2019) – does occur in higher music education (e.g. Kopelman et al., 2020; Pidd, 2013). Despite this evidence in the public domain, there remains little academic research on abuse in music education (although see Baker and Cheng, 2021; Gisler and Emmenegger, 1998; Hofmann, 2015; Pace, 2013a; Simpson, 2010). Similarly, in the classical music industry, researchers have only recently begun to document sexual harassment (Scharff, 2020; Hennakam and Bennett, 2018; Incorporated Society of Musicians, 2018; Keil and Kherija, 2022). This chapter provides a theoretical framing for studying sexual misconduct in higher music education by analysing the context that enables its occurrence in higher classical music education institutions, focusing on the UK to exemplify this discussion.

It has been suggested that neoliberal reforms of higher education have created a climate in which fears of reputational damage lead to ‘institutional airbrushing’ (Phipps, 2018: 230), whereby higher education institutions cover up instances of abuse by silencing victims and protecting high-profile members of the institution. Phipps draws on a broad understanding of neoliberalism as a form of ‘rationality in which everything is understood through the metaphor of capital’ (2018: 3). This is in line with widely used definitions of neoliberalism in this context as ‘the encouragement of market mechanisms in public HE’ (McCaig, 2018: 17). However, I follow McCaig (2018) in arguing that this broad definition does not accurately describe recent policy developments in higher education in many countries, such as the UK. Instead, ‘neoliberalism in this context […] implies the use of market incentives by governments within a regulated system in an effort to change behaviours, be they institutional, academic or student behaviours’ (McCaig, 2018: 18). Furthermore, while neoliberal reforms in higher education, in particular marketization, have indeed had profound impacts, sexual harassment – and inadequate institutional responses to it – have longer histories that go back earlier than neoliberal reforms (as documented by Pace (2013)). Therefore, I argue that the role of neoliberal market reforms in creating a conducive context for sexual misconduct in higher music education in the UK context is contradictory and uneven. This means that rather than looking to neoliberalism as a key factor explaining the context in which sexual misconduct remains unaddressed, it is necessary to examine how cultures of gendered hierarchy, authority and power in classical music, as elsewhere, create a climate that enables abuse. These cultures are embedded into the social relations, technologies and materialities that create classical music’s aesthetic, and enter into its institutions and, to some degree, its repertoire (Bull, 2019). This means that while paying attention to the impacts of neoliberal reforms, we have to primarily look to the longer histories of the genre and its institutions to make sense of sexual harassment and abuses of power in classical music.

To this end, in this chapter, I draw together my research across two areas – classical music’s cultures and inequalities and sexual misconduct by staff/faculty[[1]](#footnote-1) in higher education – in order to examine the context for sexual harassment and misconduct carried out by teachers or authority figures in higher classical music education. I focus on the UK context as neoliberal developments within this context have been influential internationally in reform agendas in higher education (Marginson, 2016: 26). I use the term ‘sexual misconduct’ to encompass sexual harassment as defined in equalities legislation such as the UK Equality Act 2010, but also to include wider sexualised behaviours that constitute professional misconduct and cause harm but may not be ‘unwanted’ as is required by standard definitions of sexual harassment (see Page et al., 2019). It should be noted that these terms include sexual and gender-based violence such as rape or sexual assault, as well as ‘grooming’ behaviours (Bull and Page, 2021a) and gender harassment (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2018). While some of these arguments may also apply to higher music education more widely, I focus specifically on classical music here in order to pay attention to its specific culture(s) and modes of authority. I draw on Kelly’s (2016) idea of the ‘conducive context’ for abuse to move away from ideas of classical music’s ‘exceptionalism’ and instead identify specific aspects of classical music cultures that might enable misconduct. By ‘exceptionalism’ I refer to an often tacit discourse that classical music is fundamentally different from – and superior to – other musical genres. Christina Scharff and I have described this as its ‘unspoken and uncontested value’ as evidenced by its privileged status in cultural funding, discourses of its ‘complexity’ and ‘emotional depth’ and its historical and contemporary associations with the white middle and upper classes (Bull and Scharff, 2017: 14). In order to make this argument, the chapter firstly discusses existing research on sexual misconduct in higher education and in classical music education, then outlines the presence of ‘institutionalised authority and gendered power’ in classical music and examines the extent to which there exists an ‘external challenge’ to these power-knowledge systems, before briefly discussing ways forward to address this issue.

## **Staff/faculty sexual misconduct in higher education**

Sexual harassment by staff/faculty towards students in higher education has been overlooked until recently (with exceptions; see Carter and Jeffs, 1995). However, large-scale surveys of students in Australia and the US in recent years have revealed its prevalence, finding that between five and ten percent of students are subjected to sexual harassment by staff during their studies, and women students, postgraduate students and LGBTQ+ students are much more likely to be targeted (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017; Cantor et al., 2019). Nevertheless, there are differences between disciplines and institutions in how prevalent this is; in the US, medicine and engineering have been found to have substantially higher rates of sexual harassment by faculty/staff than other disciplines (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2018: 281), although this study was not able to reveal reasons why this was the case. Similarly, the Australian Human Rights Commission study reported finding different rates of sexual harassment by staff across different institutions (Bagshaw, 2017). These studies highlight the role of institutional cultures in creating an environment where harassment is normalised and invisibilised (Jackson and Sundaram, 2020) or challenged.

Not all students are equally at risk of sexual misconduct from staff/faculty. One-to-one teaching between postgraduate research students and their supervisors appears to be a particular risk factor for abuse to occur (Bull and Rye, 2018; Whitley and Page, 2015). In addition, inequalities relating to gender, institutional roles, racialised identities, class and disability have been identified as enabling staff/faculty to perpetrate sexual misconduct (Bull and Page, 2021a; Whitley and Page, 2015). However, structures for reporting sexual harassment or assault in higher education appear to rarely be fit for the purpose, leading students who attempt to report through a lengthy, emotionally draining and ultimately ineffective process, which fails to achieve safety for themselves or others (Bull and Page, 2021b; National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine, 2018).

In higher music education, these wider patterns intersect with the genre cultures of different music worlds, such as classical music. For example, in my research with young people playing in classical music ensembles in the south of England (Bull, 2019), four out of the 37 young people I interviewed told me about teachers – whether at conservatoires or in pre-tertiary music education – who had engaged in bullying or emotionally abusive behaviours. Young people in my study did not label this as bullying, but instead took responsibility themselves for their teachers’ behaviour, explaining that it was justified or needed because they were not good enough, not working hard enough, or not mature enough. Around the same time that I was carrying out these interviews in 2013, sexual abuse scandals in classical music education institutions in the UK were breaking. Chetham’s School of Music, a specialist secondary school that enrols pupils aged 11 to 18 for intensive classical music education, was exposed as having employed teachers between the 1970s and 2010 who had sexually abused pupils (Pidd, 2013; 2021). My research had shown how bullying and abuse could be normalised, accepted and invisibilised within classical music’s culture through being taken for granted as typical behaviour within the one-to-one master-apprentice teaching relationship and/or camouflaged within the gendered patterns of authority and control between conductor and musicians. The emerging scandals within music schools suggested that this normalisation could also extend to sexual abuse. As a result, after finishing my PhD, I worked with campaigner and musicologist Ian Pace to organise a series of events for the music education sector to discuss how to tackle abuse (Bull, 2015; 2016a; 2017).

Focusing primarily on specialist music schools – secondary schools for 11 to 18-year-old musicians – Pace, an alumnus of one of these schools himself, has documented cases of abuse in classical music education in the UK (Pace, 2013a). He argues that elite classical music training is characterised by ‘a systematic pattern of domination, cruelty, dehumanisation, bullying and emotional manipulation from unscrupulous musicians in positions of unchecked power, of which sexual abuse is one of several manifestations’ (Pace, 2015: n.p.). He outlines various factors within specialist classical music education that create an environment where abuses – sexual, physical, psychological – can occur. The first factor is a culture of ‘great musicians’, which institutions’ reputations draw on to accrue prestige (Pace, 2013b). Secondly, the particular emotional landscape of classical music draws on values and attitudes ‘rooted in the 19th century’ (Pace, 2013b). Thirdly, the sexualisation of musical performance and performers’ dress creates an environment where sexuality is foregrounded and ever-present (Pace, 2013b). He also points to other factors, including the lack of training for music teachers and the intensity of one-to-one teaching relationships in classical music education (Pace, 2013b). Despite these critiques, Pace defends the aesthetic values and conventions of classical music more widely, arguing against attempts to challenge notions of musical ‘standards’ (Pace, 2017).

While many of these points are convincing, this chapter critical reflects on them. First, Pace’s argument that the sexualisation of musical performance contributes to abuse risks being aligned with a victim-blaming approach, mistaking sexual misconduct as being about sex rather than power and implying that ‘respectable’ feminine dress is a possible solution. Secondly, as I have argued elsewhere (Bull, 2019), the aesthetic of classical music contributes to producing the social relations – including the power relations – that characterise this space. Therefore, Pace’s argument that the aesthetic qualities of the music must not be part of a wider social change is to align with a position where the music is seen as more important than the people who make it (Cheng, 2020). As outlined below, this risks taking a position of what I am calling exceptionalism rather than looking for the common factors across all institutions and cultures that enable abuses of power to occur. Finally, and most importantly, Pace’s analysis focuses on aspects of classical music’s culture that are distinctive to the genre, thus implying that there is something unique about classical music that creates an environment where sexual misconduct can occur. Instead, in this chapter, I argue that we need to examine the common factors that exist in contexts where sexual misconduct occurs, including classical music education, rather than suggesting that classical music is special or different.

Liz Kelly’s concept of the ‘conducive context’ was formulated to understand what similarities there are between different social spaces where violence against women and girls occurs (2016). Kelly suggests two main factors that such sites might have in common. First, they are characterised by ‘institutionalised power and authority’, where this authority is ‘gendered’. This can be understood as a distribution of power within an institution (or set of institutions) whereby positions of authority are disproportionately held by men and/or cultural norms of masculinity confer authority (similarly to Connell’s ‘gender regimes’ (2006)). Second, there is ‘limited external challenge’, that is, these gendered forms of power and authority are not challenged by other forms of authority existing outside the institution (Kelly, 2016: n.p.). An example that illustrates these points is the family, which has historically been characterised by strong male authority while also being a space that is private and outside the jurisdiction of the state or other forms of social control. In the rest of this chapter, I analyse the culture of classical music in higher education in relation to these aspects of the conducive context: first, ‘institutionalised power and authority’, which is gendered; and second, that such forms of authority cannot be challenged by competing forms of power outside the institution.

## **Institutionalised authority and gendered power in classical music**

Institutionalised gendered power relations have been relatively well documented within the classical music industry and classical music education (Bull, 2016b; Green, 1997; O’Toole, 1995; Scharff, 2015; 2017). Leadership and authority positions are disproportionately held by white men, despite higher numbers of predominantly white middle- and upper-class girls learning classical music as children (Bull, 2021; Green, 1997; Scharff, 2017). In the UK, for example, recent studies have found that as few as 1.5 percent (Scharff, 2017) to 5 percent (Royal Philharmonic Society, 2019) of professional conductors working in the UK are women, and other prestigious roles such as orchestral section leaders or conservatoire teachers are more likely to be held by men than women (Scharff, 2017).

The operatic canon – widely used in classical music education – normalises male violence against women and girls through frequent, often racialised depictions that glorify or minimise it (Bull, 2019; Vincent, forthcoming). Within cultures of classical music practice more widely, institutionalised power and authority is also well evidenced through reverence to the authority of the composer and the score (Goehr, 1991; Kingsbury, 1988; Nettl, 1988), which in turn gives authority to the teacher, both in the one-to-one lesson and in public masterclasses. This also occurs through the social organisation of canonic repertoire that institutionalises the role of the conductor (Lambeau, 2015) and the ongoing weighting of programming towards dead white male composers (Donne, 2021; Bain, 2019). Analysing the microsocial dynamics of how this authority is constructed and normalised can help to understand how it is perpetuated and reproduced (Bull, 2019: 114-119; O’Toole, 1994).

Furthermore, it is not only conductors, but also teachers (of all genders) who perpetuate conditions where they wield power and authority. As Barton (2020) describes in his study of private instrumental teachers in the UK, teachers maintained that they were giving pupils choice and control over their learning, but in fact prescribed very narrowly the possible choices that pupils could make. Others have also noted that power relations exist in the master-apprentice model of instrumental tuition (Gaunt, 2011; Haddon, 2011; Rakena et al., 2016). More widely, Perkins’ (2013) study of a conservatoire documented a ‘star system’ in which hierarchies were created and perpetuated within the student body whereby students were valued or devalued based on both musical and extra-musical qualities. These forms of authority are institutionalised; if students wish to access higher classical music education, they cannot avoid participating in spaces that are characterised by these forms of gendered, racialised power.

However, this discussion reveals an apparent contradiction in that, for freelance classical musicians, despite the formal structures of authority and power within institutional spaces, the *informality* of modes of getting work can compound gendered, classed and racialised patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Hennekam and Bennett, 2017; Scharff, 2020; Yoshihara, 2008; Wang, 2015) while also failing to address normalised patterns of sexual harassment (Scharff, 2020). As Hennekam and Bennett (2017) outline in their study of sexual harassment among creative industries workers in the Netherlands, **competition for work, industry culture, gendered power relations and informal networks create a context where there is a tolerance for sexual harassment. However, these informal networks are, in the case of classical music, underpinned and supported by formal institutions in which institutionalised authority and gendered power are reproduced. These institutions play a major role in conferring and legitimising the charismatic authority of arts leaders** (Nisbett and Walmsley, 2016). It appears, therefore, that this gendered power can operate both through institutionalised authority or through informal networks. However, both have in common the limited external challenge to their culture.

## **Limited external challenge to institutionalised authority**

In addition to institutionalised authority and gendered power relations, a second characteristic of the ‘conducive context’, as Kelly (2016) describes, is ‘limited external challenge' to institutionalised authority and entitlement. This could be understood in (at least) two senses. First, this could relate to the governance structures in a particular field and their accountability to external bodies. Second, it could be understood in relation to the existence of competing modes of authority that can challenge the power-knowledge systems that exist within a particular context.

Addressing the first point around governance structures, a strong value across European higher education is institutional autonomy – the freedom to self-govern across financial, staffing, organizational, and staffing decisions. This has until recently been most fully realised in the UK (Erçetin and Finden, 2016). However, this institutional autonomy is now being challenged. First, market reforms have introduced a level of state regulation that was hitherto absent (for example, the Higher Education Reform Act of 2017 introduced a regulator for higher education in England). In this way, in the UK, the marketisation of higher education has occurred through an *increase* in state regulation and control, with less autonomy for higher education institutions (McCaig, 2018) and greater external challenge. This includes proposed statutory requirements for higher education institutions to address sexual misconduct (Office for Students, 2021).

A second challenge to institutional autonomy comes from discourses and practices relating to student ‘employability’. Within UK conservatoires, competing discourses between the musical values of classical music and the discourse of employability have been documented, as Ford (2010) describes, through competing ideals of the ‘professional’ musician. In her study, some students and teachers in conservatoires espoused a discourse of ‘art for art’s sake’ whereby ‘the intrinsic worth of the canon was held up as a justification for being a professional, and the maintenance of these [values] was seen as the goal’ (Ford, 2010: 208). A ‘competing image of the professional’ was articulated by those who upheld the discourse of employability: ‘one which measured the professional’s worth in terms of earning money’ (Ford, 2010: 208). The pressures on institutions towards ‘employability’ are incentivised through the use of national metrics to measure graduate employment, thus further diluting institutional autonomy and demonstrating external influence through the institutions of the market.

As these examples show, in the UK, the marketisation of higher education has occurred through an increase in state regulation and control. Such regulation also includes proposed legal requirements on higher education institutions to address sexual misconduct (Office for Students, 2021). These requirements can be seen as a ‘mode of authority’ that aims to shape institutional actions within a wider marketised context in order to address the sexual misconduct and harassment that occurs in higher education. However, while there have been steps towards addressing sexual misconduct in UK conservatoires (e.g. Kopelman et al., 2020), these steps have not challenged the established forms of authority in classical music that might disrupt the conducive context.

Indeed, the second way of understanding ‘external challenge’ further illuminates this point: the question of whether there exist competing modes of authority that can destabilise the power-knowledge systems that shape students’ and staff subjectivities within conservatoires. These power-knowledge systems rely on the intensive, lengthy period of socialisation that is normal for classical musicians on entering higher music education (Bull, 2019; Hall, 2017; Wagner, 2015). This socialisation tends to create closed social and musical worlds and strong identities as classical musicians (Bull, 2019). These closed social worlds that classical music students inhabit means that they are not exposed to challenges to the modes of authority that exist within music higher education institutions. Therefore, while higher music education institutions may be increasingly subjected to external challenge through marketisation and employability discourses, it appears that the social and ‘genre worlds’ of music students are not. The way forward therefore lies not in replacing patriarchal conservatoire authority with neoliberal practices, but instead, as the next section explores, in rethinking the pedagogic and gendered relationships within the conservatoire.

## **Ways forward**

Ways forward on addressing this issue need to tackle both prevention and response. Firstly, as students who are subjected to sexual misconduct or abuse only rarely report it to their institution, institutions should take proactive steps to encourage and support reporting and to adequately deal with reports (Bull et al., 2020). In addition, higher music education institutions should lead on prevention and response work within the wider music industries, especially as many part-time faculty/staff in conservatoires work across industries and educational levels.

However, the focus on the conducive context shows that ‘raising awareness’ is not enough; the structures of gendered and racialised power also need to change. This requires working towards greater equality of representation and voice among the staff and student body across different marginalised groups. For example, to address sexual misconduct, working towards greater gender equality is an important aspect of prevention, and this includes recognition of gender identities beyond binary gender as well as proactive steps for inclusion of trans people and other minoritized or marginalised groups, including students and faculty of colour.

Finally, however, it is necessary to tackle the ways in which the conducive context is created in the first place, that is, to challenge institutionalised gendered and racialised power and authority. Simply extending access for women, non-binary people and people of colour to the existing structures of authority is not sufficient, as neither established conservative modes of authority nor emergent neoliberal logics sufficiently challenge the power structures that exist in conservatoires (such as the master-apprentice model). Instead, this step requires pedagogic reforms to teaching and learning practices in music education. Challenging the master-apprentice model of one-to-one teaching, supporting peer and group learning, and developing student voice in music education are all factors that can play a role in creating a context that works against harassment or abuse occurring (see for example Gaunt and Westerlund, 2013; Mayne et al., 2022). It is necessary to minimise the hierarchies that are taken for granted within the normal conventions of the genre and to re-imagine and transform classical music’s culture and institutions.

## **Conclusion: Moving beyond classical music’s exceptionalism**

This chapter has analysed cultures and institutions of higher classical music education to ask whether it creates a ‘conducive context’ that enables sexual misconduct to occur. There are various factors that suggest that classical music does indeed constitute such a context due to its high levels of institutionalised power and authority, including gendered power relations. While there are increasing external challenges to institutional governance structures due to the marketisation of higher education, it is not clear that this challenge extends to students’ subjectivities, as it appears that classical musicians still inhabit closed genre worlds.

The theorisation of the ‘conducive context’ can make visible the similarities across sites that normalise sexual misconduct and violence against women. Therefore, while this chapter has outlined specific aspects of classical music’s cultures that enable sexual misconduct, this is not intended as an argument that there is something distinctive about classical music higher education that makes sexual misconduct more likely to occur in this space. Indeed, this idea of classical music’s exceptionalism – the discourse that classical music is fundamentally different from other social and cultural spaces – can contribute towards the conducive context by suggesting there is something special and valuable about classical music that makes it better and different from other musical or social scenes. This helps create an environment where there is limited (although increasing) external challenge to institutionalised power.

Instead, the theorisation of the conducive context allows us to move beyond exceptionalism and to acknowledge that sexual harassment and misconduct and other forms of power-based abuse happen everywhere in society, but that there are factors that can make them more or less likely to happen. The discussion in this chapter also opens up questions around how the informal networks required to access work in the creative industries might enable sexual misconduct, as well as formal structures of gendered power. However, while these factors may occur in distinctive ways in classical music higher education, they are also present in other sites where sexual abuse and misconduct have been documented, such as elite sports education or the entertainment industry.

Finally, the extent to which neoliberal market reforms in higher music education in the UK context have played a role in creating a conducive context for sexual misconduct is contradictory and uneven. There is now more external challenge to the institutionalised authority of classical music, but this external challenge is pushing institutions towards greater accountability according to a narrow set of metrics, which does not fundamentally challenge structures of power and exclusion. Furthermore, the factors discussed above that create a conducive context in classical music were in place long prior to the introduction of market reforms into this space. Ironically, in the UK, the marketisation of higher education has led to an *increase* in state regulation and control, with less autonomy for higher education institutions (McCaig 2018). Nevertheless, these reforms also compound and intensify ‘star’ systems of staff and students as documented by Perkins (2013) in the UK before the most recent round of legislation increasing marketisation. Classical music higher education was not, then, innocent before neoliberalism took hold, and it does not appear that neoliberal reforms have, as yet, fundamentally shifted the previous cultures of classical music higher education documented in the 1980s (Nettl 1988; Kingsbury 1988). In acting to address sexual misconduct in higher music education, it is therefore important to remain vigilant as to the influence of market reforms while also working to challenge cultures of institutionalised power and authority that have older and deeper roots.

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1. In the US, the term ‘faculty’ refers to academic employees, and ‘staff’ to non-academic employees, while in the UK, the term ‘staff’ covers both. Here, I use both terms in order to indicate that my discussion encompasses academics across all jurisdictions. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)