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A life without a plan? Freelance musicians in pandemic limbo

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the already precarious conditions of freelance workers. The aim of this study is to understand what it means for freelance musicians to be in pandemic limbo. Thirteen Swedish professional freelance musicians in the classical genre were interviewed about their experiences in the midst of the pandemic. A theoretical frame of reference is offered with concepts from Bourdieu, sociology of emotions and emotional geographies. This enables an understanding of what it means as a freelancer to be dislocated and disrupted in relation to places and spaces of work and investments in time and emotions. The conclusions are about the ambivalent emotions and processes of emotional management that are caused by the pandemic. For freelance musicians, depending on their access to the live-settings of gigs, auditions and social venues, it is like being thrown back in time and place (back to where careers were slowly built). However, while at a distance from the normal run of careers, constructive processes of critical reflection and re-orientation have been initiated.

1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of the pandemic Covid-19 in Sweden in March 2020, the performing arts have been heavily restricted.1 With a few exceptions, the sector has experienced what was essentially a ban on its activities. Surveys by stakeholder organisations showed that the situation for professional freelance musicians was alarming already by autumn 2020.2 One-third of the freelancers had either changed careers or were considering doing so. The situation in mid-2022 is still uncertain, despite of a slow re-opening in mid-2021. Thirteen Swedish freelance musicians in the classical/art music genre were interviewed in January–February 2021 about their experiences from the pandemic. The question in the title of this article, a life without a plan?, is about freelancer Björn’s concerns about the limbo he is experiencing (and what he perceives to be a lack of initiative from cultural policy). The freelancers have been dislocated from their normal working life for a long time, facing the disruptions of on-and-off bookings and cancellations respectively, due to waves of infection and changing restrictions. The interviewees express great concerns for the future, not knowing what to come and when. The aim of this article is to understand what it means for freelance musicians to be in pandemic limbo. The article has two research questions: What does it mean for the freelancers to be dislocated from their normal practices – places, spaces and times? How are the freelancers dealing with the disruptions of pandemic careers? Studies suggest that the pandemic has led to new work-related problems or career shocks (Akkerman et al., 2020). Among musicians in the UK for example, the sudden loss of careers has proved to be particularly difficult to handle (Cohen and Ginsborg, 2021). In Australia as well, creative workers struggled with the loss of normal practices (Flore et al., 2021). In overseas work (de Borja, 2021) and international mobility (Phan, 2021), there are new problems such as forced immobility or being stranded. The pandemic has contributed to increased inequalities, where the state of previously established careers affects the probabilities of being able to outwait the crisis (Comunian and England, 2020). In the creative sector, freelance workers are performing an extensive emotional management, even under normal circumstances (Butler and Stoyanova Russel, 2018; Alacovska, 2019). Freelance musicians for example, are struggling to create a fixed point in a job on uncertain grounds (Norholm Lundin, 2022). As neoliberal entrepreneurial self’s, freelancers are always responsible and in charge of their careers (Scharff, 2016; Banks, 2019). Due to the pandemic, freelancers are experiencing new forms of limbo, as they are stuck in careers, time- and place-wise (Butler-Rees and Robinson, 2020; see also Bamber, 2007; Butler Brown, 2007). There is a growing body of studies about the effects

1 E-mail address: anna.norholm.lundin@edu.su.se.
2 Musik Centrum Vast [Music Centre Vest] (2020). Var tredje musiker lämnar yrket [Every third musician is leaving the job].

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of the pandemic on working life. However, there is a lack of sociological-pedagogical studies about how freelance workers are dealing with the fact that they are not being able to ‘stay in the loop’. The pandemic offers significant challenges for freelancers, who are depending on their visibility at live-gigs and auditions, to be able to maintain careers and professional self’s. The case of the already resilient and vulnerable group of freelance musicians, in times of crisis and change, is interpreted with concepts from Bourdieu’s theory of social practices, sociology of emotions and emotional geographies (Bourdieu, 1990, 1995, 1999; Hochschild, 1983; Cresswell, 2002; Davidson and Milligan, 2004). This frame of reference enables new perspectives on the dislocation of freelancers, as moments of broader socio-spatial relationships (Holt, 2008). To start with, the relational space of classical music involves unequal conditions of work and life for freelance and permanent employees respectively (Nørholm Lundin, 2022). In times of crisis, the interplay between access to place and space and emotions respectively, are likely to become more complex (Threadgold, 2018; Flisbäck, 2014; Lund, 2019). The situation of freelance musicians has relevance for policy and stakeholders in relation to the reopening of a (sustainable) post-pandemic performing arts sector. In addition, the article has broader relevance for problematising general trends in freelance work, towards idealised flexible working arrangements as well as mobile, employable and entrepreneurial self’s (Flisbäck, 2002; Glavin et al., 2021; de Peuter, 2014; Caretta et al., 2018; Scharff, 2016).

2. Emotional geographies in freelance work

This section presents studies about the emotional management that freelance- and portfolio-workers are performing to deal with precarious conditions of work. These perspectives are used to explore what it means for freelancers to be dislocated in relation to place, space and time during the pandemic. Freelance workers are generally highly trained and merited, but despite of this they face precarious employment conditions (Chafe and Kaida, 2020). As freelancers, they are dealing with significant financial, social, existential and emotional uncertainty (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010; Hoedemaekers, 2018; Storey et al., 2005; Glavin et al., 2021). Threadgold (2018) are in fact defining the precarious as an affective state, rather than a social class per se (stressing the emotional uncertainty in particular). Freelancers are dealing with temporary and fluid memberships (Oakland and Ginsborg, 2020) as well as informal and complex structures of employment (among friends-colleagues-employers and adepts-patrons) (Alacovska, 2018; Hennekam and Bennet, 2016; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010). With freelance work comes a forced individuality (Banks, 2019), to be always in charge of maintaining careers and carefully avoiding risks as poor performances, injuries or career breaks (Wainwright and Turner, 2006).

To be always active, flexible and time-efficient are internalized norms of the entrepreneurial self of freelance workers (Scharff, 2016). With sociology of emotions and emotional geographies, the socio-spatial aspects of emotions can be further explored (Bericat, 2016; Holt, 2008). As Lund (2019) suggests, emotions are integrated to and working through hierarchical relations of power and status. In addition, these hierarchical relations of power are about unequal access to safe and secure places of work. The socio-spatial character of emotions has been defined as “complex relational experiences within a wider web of interdependent social relationships” (Hillcoat-Nalletambay and Phillips, 2011, p. 202). The concept of emotional management, founded by Arlie Hochschild, has been used to understand the (surface/deep) work that freelancers are performing to keep up appearances as well as hopes (Alacovska, 2019; Butler and Stoyanova Russell, 2018; Lingo and Tepper, 2013; Chafe and Kaida, 2020; Hoedemaekers, 2018; Hochschild, 1983).

Emotional management is about dealing with conflicting emotions; what one feels is suitable to feel, what one wants to feel and what one does to induce that feeling (Addison, 2017). To be able to (emotionally) manage the demands of precarious work has been described as a resource but also a risk, contributing to the self-exploitation of freelancers as a flexible buffer in the precariat (for example Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010). Not being able to maintain normal practices due to crisis is problematic in terms of maintaining careers as well as occupational faith (Hennekam and Bennet, 2016; Flore et al., 2021; Ye, 2021). However, the pandemic has led to adapted forms of emotional management, as increased critical reflection and openness about previously hidden emotions (Wettergren et al., 2020; Rudrum et al., 2022; Jeżinski and Lorek-Żejniska, 2021; Szostak and Sulkowski, 2021). To conclude, these concepts are used to understand the complex interplay between places, spaces and emotions in freelance work – in times of crisis, when normal practices are challenged. According to emotional geographers, there is potential in exploring the meaning of embodied social practices through encounters (or lack of encounters) in significant places, which are understood as moments in broader socio-spatial relationships (Holt, 2008). In addition, the socio-spatial reproduction and transformation of broader-scale inequalities through individuals’ embodiment are especially complex and fruitful to study in times of crisis (Holt, 2008, p. 238; Flisbäck, 2014). This article contributes to previous studies about freelance work, by exploring what it means for freelance musicians to be dislocated and disrupted in relation to normal and embodied social practices as well as places and spaces of work.

3. Embodied practices in social space

As suggested by Holt (2008) there is great potential in understanding some of the deeper socio-spatial and geographical aspects of emotions. Bourdieu’s theory of social practices is about what is ‘done’ in a social field or space, considering its social and symbolic significance. What is done is understood relationally, as part of a force- or battlefield with various conditions of work and life (Bourdieu, 1984, 1995). The unequal distribution of (social and symbolic) possibilities and necessities is reproduced in daily actions and rituals (Wacquant, 2006). This article explores the meaning of embodied social practices in times of crisis and change (Threadgold, 2018; Flisbäck, 2014). What unites the participants in the field of for example classical music is a common belief (illusio) in the value of what is done in the field and that it’s worth investing in (Bourdieu, 1983, 1988), which works as a shared sense of purpose that becomes one’s own sense of purpose invested (Threadgold, 2018). The belief is at the heart of the participants’ practical sense for what is right to do and feel like, which in turn is made possible by the participants’ embodied social histories (habitus) (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu contributes with an understanding of the embodied and taken-for-granted character of daily actions and rituals, which are self-regulated by quasi-bodily emotions (Bourdieu, 1990, 1999). This self-regulation involves a sense for one’s place, which is accepted as natural, just or desired, i.e., it is misrecognised (symbolic violence). This sense of place is self-regulated by quasi-bodily emotions, for example pride, shame, ease, unease and ambivalence (Bourdieu, 1999). These emotions can be understood as moments in broader socio-spatial relationships in social space (Holt, 2008). In fact, Cresswell (2002) argues that the body in itself can be understood as the locus of the social world embodied. Bourdieu’s theory is about reproduction and change (Crosley, 2003). In times of macro- and micro-crisis, struggles over and about illusio are increasing (Threadgold, 2018) and individuals’ embodied social practices/habitus are falling out of alignment with the field they operate within (Flisbäck, 2014). The concepts from Bourdieu are used to understand the (deeper) embodied layers of the freelancers’ actions and emotions, which are founded in their positions in social space. The freelancers are guided by their embodied sense of their own place (what is right to do and feel like, where and when), which however is greatly

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3 A place/space or group with precarious conditions of work.

4 Not just body, not just emotion (Bourdieu, 1990).
challenged due to the pandemic.

4. Methodology

This study takes a Bourdieu-oriented methodological approach, where the researcher is reconstructing the object of research in order to understand and explain the social and symbolic significance of what is done in a particular context (and what is said about this) (Bourdieu, 2004; Bourdieu et al., 1999).

At the start of the research process, a stakeholder organisation for professional musicians was contacted to get feedback on the project idea and to get in contact with interviewees. The author had a dialogue with the interviewees to make sure that the ethical demands of informed consent and confidentiality were carefully met (Coe et al., 2017).

Thirteen professional freelance musicians in the classical music genre, with some variations in terms of instrument, age, working years and professional orientation, participated in the study. A majority of the interviewees were women (11 out of 13) which may have influenced the results. However, the data is too small to be able to generalise in relation to gender and nor was this the purpose of the study. For reasons of confidentiality, the interviewees were given fictitious names, their instruments presented in groups, and their age approximated (see Table 1). The semi-structured in-depth interviews were about the interviewees’ career and life histories; backgrounds and entry into the profession, professional trajectories, experiences and strategies during the pandemic and plans for the future. The primary interviews were conducted via Zoom in January–February 2021 (together with follow-up interviews in February–April 2022). The interviews were transcribed and slightly edited to improve readability and analysed with an abductive approach (Coe et al., 2017).

The analysis were developed in relation to three themes: 1. the pandemic challenges in relation to place, space, time and emotions, 2. the social and symbolic significance of normal practices that were challenged due to the pandemic, and 3. the resources and factors contributing to the freelancers’ strategies and future plans. The analysis were finally presented in three sections, focusing on: A. emotions and emotional management, B. career paths and social structure, and C. emotions of marginalisation as risk and resource.

5. Context: working as a freelance musician in Sweden

The labour market of Swedish freelancers in the classical music genre is mainly placed within the official institutions (symphony orchestras, opera choirs, larger ensembles) and the free cultural life (private theatres, churches, temporary projects, own ensembles). Freelancers deputise and fill vacancies on short- or long-term basis and/or apply for official project fund for own projects and ensembles. Some are combining the freelancing with part-time permanent positions, other jobs or studies. Permanent positions are few and won through extensive audition procedures in sharp international competition. There are official social security and unemployment funds, but these are criticised for being ill-fitted to freelancers’ flexible working situation. The interviewees, presented in Table 1, represent some of the variations in the freelance labour market. They all have extensive education and are highly merited, combining various gigs and projects, sometimes with other kinds of jobs. Sara is the only interviewee with a part-time (60%) permanent position in an orchestra, which she combines with the freelancing. In classical music, a musician is defined as professional if he/she is trained at music college and established to some degree at the (professional) institutions or the free cultural life. The Swedish strategy to deal with the pandemic did stand out internationally, not applying a lockdown in the strict sense, but using recommendations to affect behaviours (stay at home, keep a distance) (Weman Josefsson, 2021). As the numbers of deceased and infected persons in Sweden were high, society was marked by precautions and many people chose to isolate themselves and limit social interactions (Jukkala et al., 2021). Since February 2022, most restrictions are removed, but the audiences have only in part returned to the performing arts scenes. The performing arts sector has experienced changing restrictions, in relation to audiences, arrangements and working places. The combination of sharp and often changing restrictions – allowed audiences (5–50 persons), distance in the audience and on stage (1–2 m), Covid-passports, sick-leaves and difficulties to meet/rehearse, audiences staying at home – have led to the cancellation of most productions. For the freelancers, this has caused significant losses in terms of income and opportunities to maintain careers. There have been some governmental crisis funds, but these have (at least initially) been criticised for being insufficient and ill-fitted to the freelancers’ ways of working.

6. Findings

The findings explore what it means for freelance musicians to be in pandemic limbo (what is at stake?). The findings are presented in three sections, built on empirical data and theoretical concepts. The first section is focusing on the freelancers’ emotional responses to, and management of, the pandemic disruptions and dislocations – which are understood as moments in broader socio-spatial relationships (Holt, 2008). The second section is focusing on the effects of the pandemic on freelance career paths, which are being reproduced and transformed in the relational space of classical music (Bourdieu, 1995). The third section departs in the freelancers’ sense of marginalisation, as a particular case of ambivalence and emotional management in the midst of the pandemic.

7. “From one day to the next, the season was gone”

At the time of the interviews, the freelance musicians have been and are still dealing with the abrupt and irregular situations of gigs being

Table 1 Interviewees and background variables.

| Name      | Instrument | Age | Gender | Working years | Professional orientation |
|-----------|------------|-----|--------|---------------|--------------------------|
| Bjorn     | Strings    | 45+ F | M       | 20–25         | Freelancer               |
| Camilla   | Wind       | 50+ F | F       | 20–25         | Freelancer               |
| Malin     | Wind       | 35+ F | F       | 5–10          | Freelancer + teaching the instrument |
| Hanna     | Wind       | 40+ F | F       | 15–20         | Freelancer + other job   |
| Isa       | Wind       | 30+ F | F       | 5–10          | Freelancer + studies     |
| Agnes     | Strings    | 30+ F | F       | 5–10          | Freelancer + other job   |
| Felicia   | Strings    | 30+ F | F       | 5–10          | Freelancer               |
| Ulrik     | Wind       | 45+ M | M       | 20–25         | Freelancer + permanent position |
| Sara      | Strings    | 30+ F | F       | 5–10          | Freelancer               |
| Fredrika  | Singing    | 40+ F | F       | 10–15         | Freelancer               |
| Dora      | Strings    | 55+ F | F       | 30–35         | Freelancer               |
| Louise    | Singing    | 35+ F | F       | 10–15         | Freelancer               |
| Maja      | Strings    | 40+ F | F       | 5–10          | Freelancer               |

5 Or, in other words: what is at stake?
6 The study does not involve sensitive personal data and data is treated in accordance with the requirements of safe storage (GDPR) and research ethics from the Swedish Council of Research and the Swedish Board of Ethical Review.
7 The primary interviews were used in this article, with just a few quotes coming from the follow-up interviews.
8 Governmental report (2006) The professional Orchestral Music in Sweden.
9 Report from Swedish Agency for Cultural Policy Analysis (2021) One year with the pandemic; description of occupations at union Saco’s homepage (2021); personal contact with union Symf (2021).
10 Quote Malin.
booked and cancelled on-and-off due to first and second waves of infection.\textsuperscript{11} In addition, the freelancers are dealing with changing restrictions in relation to audiences, productions and working arrangements. The freelancers express strong emotions of absurdity, frustration and concern – in relation to their lost places and spaces of work as well as their lost investments in time and emotional effort. There is a lot at stake for the freelancers, not being able to control and affect their careers, which is explored in this section. The freelancers describe an overall dramatic mood, as exemplified by Sara: “it’s an absurd situation where one suddenly, like one is not fired, it’s just all the working opportunities that have ceased”. For Louise, working at the time in another Nordic country, which unlike Sweden rapidly locked society down, the outburst of the pandemic was “almost like this war- or disaster mood” and “we got nervous that we were not going to make it back to Sweden, we bought tickets and left head over heals”. Analytically it is argued that these emotions are caused by the pandemic, but the freelancers are also able to use the emotions to deal with the pandemic. By emphasising the absurdity of the situation – where one is part of something that is out of one’s control – it is possible for the freelancers to distance themselves from the normal demands of work. These embodied entrepreneurial selves, which are in charge and control of careers, are being questioned – which is the source of relief but also ambivalent emotions and distress (Scharff, 2016; Threadgold, 2018; Wettergren et al., 2020). The ‘emotional geographies’ of classical music are about unequal conditions and emotional strain, enhanced but also challenged due to the pandemic. What is at stake due the pandemic needs to be explored in relation to the social and symbolic significance of normal (pre-pandemic) social practices. Under normal conditions, there is a culture of professional secrecy, which states that “one has to appear already successful to be able to get the gigs” and “one is drilled to think that nothing is as important as the music” (Isa). In addition, there are several statements about a ‘golden rule’ which applies to freelancers. This golden rule is about being always ready and in shape for calls and gigs to come, especially as “maybe you only get one chance, and maybe it’s your dream-gig that’s calling” (Ulrik). However, this is challenged due to the pandemic, as the situation is too absurd and impossible to control (as suggested by Sara and Louise above). The fact that the conditions are shared with many others, a sense of ‘sitting in the same boat’, enables the freelancers to distance themselves from the demands of normal working life. It allows the freelancers to take a break from their entrepreneurial self’s. Still, these embodied normal practices are a source of ambivalent emotions as well, as they are self-regulated through deep emotions of ease and unease respectively (Bourdieu, 1999; Cresswell, 2002). Dora for example, finds it hard to take a break from her extensive individual practice at the instrument, as she feels she has to stay in shape for calls and gigs to come, “which they most likely will not”. Dora describes a new sense of “hopelessness”, which is new to her “like it’s no point”. It is suggested that these emotions add to ambivalence and strain, as doubts is a threat or even taboo in music careers: “we are drilled into thinking that nothing is as important as the music” (Isa). In addition, the freelancers express a sense of loss and frustration due to cancelled gigs and missed experiences. While some of the freelancers have been paid even though gigs were cancelled, they still have missed out on important experiences: “I still don’t know what it means to have a long-term gig at the opera choir, because I haven’t done that” (Louise). To get paid but not able to work seem to be an anomaly in relation to the freelancers’ embodied professional pride: “it’s not only for the money that one does it” (Dora). It seems clear that these ambivalent emotions are caused by the increased challenges to normal social practices, which are driven by a deep sense of commitment and pride: “this job is a calling” (BJörn). At the same time as the freelancers are struggling with “getting food on the table” (Maja), the personal and emotional meaning of work seem as vital, which exemplifies the reversed economy of artistic professions (Bourdieu, 1983, 1988). The emotional management that the freelancers are performing is about preserving (deep) occupational faith as much as (surface) appearances (Addison, 2017; Ye, 2021). Emotions of loss and frustration are related to the fact that the freelancers have worked hard to get the gigs, building careers over a long time: “it is painful to see, things built over a long time, shredding to pieces” (Fredrika). In addition, the freelancers express deep concerns about the future, not only their own but the possibilities of colleagues and employers as well, to be able to invest again to the necessary degree to re-build what has been shredded to pieces. As Malin expresses it, it’s like being thrown back in time and place due to the pandemic, like when one was in music college, slowly building careers. Due to the pandemic, the freelancers are dislocated from the (physical) places of work – gigs, auditions and social venues – where they can affect their careers and professional self’s. The (degree of) access to places of work can be understood as moments of broader socio-spatial relationships, where place and space act as two sides of the same coin (Holt, 2008; Bourdieu, 1995; Lund, 2019). Malin’s thought about being thrown back in time and place, are pinpointing the conditions of freelance careers, which can’t be taken for granted (see also Norholm Lundin, 2022). These dynamics are even more complicated, because freelancers need to be visible, performing and networking, to be able to ‘stay in the loop’. Freelancer Malin exemplifies this: “if one happens to get out of the loop, if they call someone else, then one is out of the loop very quickly”. Maja is considering what it will take for her to re-start her post-pandemic career:\textsuperscript{12} “it takes at least one year where one has to say yes to these kamikaze-gigs, that’s how one gets a higher ranking at the deputee-lists”. There are several quotes about the freelancers’ concerns about how to find the energy to invest to the necessary degree, after all the re-starts and draining on-and-off bookings and cancellations respectively. According to BJörn, the second wave (in autumn 2020) added increased gravity to the situation, as the gigs were cancelled again: “it was like the cover was torn down” (BJörn). The findings indicate that classical music, for freelancers in particular, is a very live-based phenomena. To be able to meet and perform is crucial for freelancers, to be able to maintain careers as well as professional self’s. However, due to the pandemic this is hindered in many ways.

8. “One has no idea, if one will be still relevant for gigs”\textsuperscript{13}

The strong emotions that the freelancers are dealing with are part of the increased precarious conditions of work, due to the pandemic (Comunian and England, 2020; Flore et al., 2021). To understand what is at stake, these emotions are explored as moments of broader socio-spatial relationships (Holt, 2008) where permanent and freelance employees act as distinct and distinctive positions (Bourdieu, 1995). The reproduction and transformation of these basic hierarchies as well as between various freelance career paths in the pandemic setting are explored in this section. Freelancer Agnes describes normal working life as an “emotional rollercoaster”, where one is pending in and out of gigs, and in and out of a sense of belonging and recognition of skills. It seems like the freelancers have to create their sense of having a fixed spot in working life as a basic condition (Scharff, 2016; Banks, 2019; Norholm Lundin, 2022). However, this sense of being in charge of careers is sensitive to assessment procedures, at gigs and auditions in particular. Sara exemplifies the close relationships between her performances and her professional self-esteem: “sometimes when you are performing bad, it feels hard, like I’m never going to be able to deal with the pressure, but then when you are performing well at some point, then it’s this great kick”. Agnes as well expresses the deep effects of assessments, which

\textsuperscript{11} Cancellations due to first wave (early spring 2020) and after some new bookings (late spring/summer 2020) new cancellations due to second wave (autumn 2020).

\textsuperscript{12} Which also involves some re-orientation towards a Swedish setting, after she has decided that it is too hard to commute to another Nordic country.

\textsuperscript{13} Quote Felicia.
may even contribute to a sense of confusion and professional doubt: “it became like this buzz, I didn’t know what was true anymore”. The freelancers are performing an extensive emotional management to preserve occupational faith, in relation to these distinctive practices. The basic hierarchy between permanent and freelance employers are especially stark in the prestigious institutions as for example symphony orchestras, opera choirs and larger ensembles. The distinction between groups of employees are maintained in assessment procedures as well as social interaction at gigs, auditions and other social venues. According to the freelancers, the tone and attitude of employers and permanent employees varies a lot: if the freelancers are taken for granted or appreciated, if they are ignored, picked at or getting constructive feedback, if they sit by themselves at breaks or if they are included as part of the group, and if the difference between freelance and permanent employers are enhanced or not. This social interaction affects the freelancers, as it is taken as tokens of how they are doing and if they will be booked again, in the informal and complex structure of employment (Alceovska, 2018). While the freelancers are at gigs and auditions, they have temporary access to social venues, where they can affect their possibilities of getting hired again. However, due to the pandemic they are hindered to take part in these settings, as gigs and auditions are mostly cancelled. The deep sense of uncertainty this has caused, is expressed in the title of this section: “one has no idea, if one will still be relevant for gigs” (Felicia). At the same time, to get a break from the pressure of being a constant ‘temp’, is also described as a relief and a chance to reflect. To understand what is at stake due to the pandemic, the analysis must depart in the already established career paths of the freelancers. Some freelancers are oriented towards a ‘traditional’ career path: auditioning and aiming mainly at the larger institutions (symphony orchestras, opera choirs, larger ensembles), in combination with some gigs in the smaller settings of free cultural life (own project-s/ensembles, temporary productions). Other freelancers are oriented towards a ‘flexible’ career path: aiming mainly at own smaller groups and projects, with a broader spectra of gigs at the institutions and free cultural life, as well as combinations with other jobs and studies. What appears to affect the freelancers’ conditions of work and lifestyles are their career paths, how well established they are and their age. The middle-aged and well established traditionally oriented freelancers strive to maintain privileges such as being recurrent and appreciated in some work settings, working relatively close to home and able to sleep at home and make plans for leisure time. While the younger and less established traditional freelancers find work all-consuming, pointless to make plans for leisure time (as these will probably be cancelled due to gigs). The flexibly oriented freelancers strive to create privileges such as being able to choose what they do, instead of being dependent on the choices of others at auditions and gigs. Freelancer Fredrika talks about her quest to take some ‘power over definitions back’ and to be creative together with small groups of close colleagues. In addition, the flexible career path is about taking some control over place and time, as expressed by Hanna: “to use my time well”. What is common for traditional and flexible freelance careers is high mobility, working in many settings. To be in some control of one’s place, space and emotions is attractive. In addition, to have integrity and work-life-balance act as distinctive features of a “worthy” or “dignified” career and lifestyle (Sara). While the traditional career path is usually regarded as prestigious, the flexible career path is regarded as autonomous but also risky. With both career paths follow some uncertain investments in terms of time and emotional effort. For Sara, who has won a part-time position in a (traditional) symphony orchestra, this is described as a great relief. However, regular positions are scarce and many freelancers have to keep on as freelancers in the traditional institutions, dealing with the pressure of being a replaceable cog in the machinery. The flexible career path has some opportunities such as being able to be creative in safe communities. Combinations with other jobs might take some of the pressure of finding enough gigs. However, the flexible career path is regarded as risky and even taboo: “one might be seen as inferior if one is doing other things” (Malin) or “one might be seen as someone who has quit” (Hanna). The flexibly oriented freelancers are performing an emotional management to dare to take these risks, to follow their own paths. In times of crisis, struggles over social order might increase (Threadgold, 2018; Flisbäck, 2014). As mentioned, due to the perceived ‘absurdity’ of the pandemic situation, the hierarchies between groups of employees and career paths seem to be loosening up. There are several expressions about daring to be more open about doing other things, enhancing the value of this: “I actually play better, now that I do other things as well” (Hanna). The flexible career paths seem to be gaining increased legitimacy due to the pandemic, as there is an increased respect “for anyone who is just trying to survive” (Camilla). In fact, the flexibly oriented freelancers seem to better off in terms of being able to stay in touch and perform in small-scale settings. In addition, time can be used better in own groups and projects: to record, stream, write applications and prepare for future projects. This contributes to a sense of meaning and integrity, as in Hanna’s case. The traditionally oriented freelancers on the other hand, are even more than usually left to their own devices – to practice at their instrument and wait for calls and gigs. The freelancers working at the traditional institutions are not able to keep in touch with colleagues, employers and networks: “there are no natural social venues outside of the gigs” (Camilla). Previous studies point at increased inequalities due to the pandemic (Comunian and England, 2020). It is argued that this is the case for freelancers in general, and for less established freelancers in particular. The increased inequalities are about being dislocated in terms of crucial work-related places, spaces and times. As the freelancers have lost access to the physical places of work, they have also lost access to (deeper layers) of established positions and professional self’s (which can be taken for granted). However, the enhanced legitimacy of flexible career paths may be constructive for freelancers also in a longer perspective.

9. “We are a marginalised group actually”

As exemplified in the previous section, it is problematic for the freelancers to be dislocated from the social venues of professional life. In addition, the freelancers express a sense of marginalisation in relation to society at large. It seems like the pandemic has exacerbated the precarious conditions of freelance work, in terms of ambiguous status (Comunian and England, 2020). Freelancer Louise talks about a duplicity, in terms of professional life and society: “it’s this duplicity, where one has a job where one can fill the table with flowers, where one is very celebrated, but there is no backup anywhere in any systems, and one falls very much outside of what is regular adult life, for everyone else”. Louise’s quote exemplifies a duplicity that has to do with being able to create a dignified and worthy work and lifestyle (Bourdieu, 1995). While at a distance from the normal run of careers, the freelancers are reflecting critically about their careers and some are re-orienting towards more flexible career paths. The dominant societal discourse during the pandemic has been to prevent infection as an overall goal, where cultural life among other groups in society have to “wait and see what happens” (Björn). According to Björn, there is a problematic tendency of not “addressing how damn bad things are”. The freelancers are ambivalent in relation to this, as they agree that health issues are to be prioritised. Still, they find it painful to see other sectors, as shopping malls and sport events, go on almost as usual (while cultural events are cancelled). This adds to the freelancers’ sense of being increasingly discriminated in society: “it’s as if we don’t even exist” (Maja). In addition, this is related to the culture of professional secrecy, where “one has to appear already successful to get the gigs” (Isa) and

14 Or limited to smaller productions, with only permanent employees.

15 Quote Fredrika.
where “one wants to be liked, not difficult” (Malin). This culture makes it difficult to be open about emotions, in relation to the pandemic for example. However, there are some examples of daring to be more open, sharing experiences in small groups of colleagues. The sense of increased marginalisation in relation to society at large acts as a painful reminder of difficulties in getting access to for example social insurance benefits, even under normal conditions. 16 There are great hindrances for getting access to what is just “regular adult life, for everyone else” (Louise), due to bureaucratic hinders and lack of knowledge about freelance work. During the pandemic, the Swedish government has set up crisis funds for performing artists, which have been considered to be supportive but also ill-fitted to freelance workers, who rely on gigs coming in often on short notice. There is a major clash between the bureaucratic demands for documentation and the informal structure of freelance jobs respectively: “I couldn’t prove it, we only had a verbal agreement” (Malin). On the other hand, there is also an increased sense of integration to society, where the freelancers feel that they share some of the conditions with others, as many are ‘sitting in the same boat’. To see others, not working or to a very small extent, enables the freelancers to take a break from their entrepreneurial self’s (Scharff, 2016). In addition, the freelancers are able to transform the outsider-status into a (new) sense of pride, control and direction. There are many quotes about the privilege of being able to do something that is unique and different from ‘normal’ jobs. It is considered to be a privilege to be able to immerse oneself at what one is already very good at, in for example individual practice at the instrument. The individual practice acts as a safe and well-known ritual, which enables a sense of control and direction: “we can always work, even when we are out of work” (Ulrik). The sense of doing something unique is also related to the harsh conditions. Maja for example, talks about long-distance commuting, working impossible hours and having little access to social insurance. Even though her emotions in relation to her career-choice are mixed, it’s like the struggle is convincing her to persist: “I wish that I’d want to do something else, but I can’t” (Maja). Björn also talks about the job as “a calling, not something you just quit like that”. It seems as if the pandemic are dealt with emotionally, so that it even strengthens the freelancers’ occupational faith. The pandemic is used by the freelancers both to distance themselves from their calling, and to preserve their sense of calling. With Bourdieu (1983) it seems as they are performing an emotional management to be able to ‘make a virtue out of necessity’. To practice at the instrument acts as a daily ritual to maintain careers as well as professional self’s (to be compared with athletes’ training) (Norholm Lundin, 2020, 2022). 17 There are several quotes about individual practice, as a way to create a sense of control and direction during the pandemic. Felicia for example has been addressing technical issues and the practice has been perceived as “a saviour” while outwaiting the pandemic. For Björn, practice has been a way to turn the pandemic to his advantage: to let the “pandemic serve me” and “to make use of the time”. It is suggested that the freelancers are finding new ways to maintain entrepreneurial self’s, who are in charge of their careers, in for example individual practice (Scharff, 2016). However, there are some complications when it comes to individual practice as well, which is related to access to place. The freelancers are often getting access to rehearsal rooms while at gigs, and only doing some of their practice at home. While out of gigs and with neighbours and family members working at home due to pandemic restrictions, the freelancers lack access to crucial ‘soundscapes’ (places/spaces for being able to sound/make sounds). This is another aspect of the emotional geographies of classical music, where freelancers constantly struggle to maintain access to places and spaces of work.

16 Unemployment, parental- and sick leave.
17 Musicians practice individually daily, in between 2 and 8 h in mentioned in the interviews.

10. Conclusions and discussion

The aim of this article is to understand what it means for freelance musicians to be in pandemic limbo. The article has two research questions: What does it mean for the freelancers to be dislocated from their normal practices – places, spaces and times? How are the freelancers dealing with the disruptions of pandemic careers? The article contributes with empirical findings from an already resilient but also vulnerable group of professionals, namely freelance musicians in the classical genre. This group is studied in the unique era of the pandemic Covid-19, where normalities are challenged in foundational ways. The theoretical contribution is about synthesising concepts from sociology of emotions, emotional geographies and Bourdieu’s theory about social practices (for example Addison, 2017; Holt, 2008; Bourdieu, 1995, 1999). The analysis offers new perspectives on the significance of embodied social practices, in times of crisis and change. To be dislocated from the significant places and social venues of work, where freelance careers and professional self’s can be maintained, is a source of deeply ambivalent emotions. To be disrupted in freelance careers is like being thrown back in time and place, back to the days when careers where slowly built. However, while at a distance from the normal run of careers, there is room for increased critical reflection and possible re-orientations. Flexible freelance career paths, where autonomy and community are promoted, have gained in legitimacy during the pandemic. Traditional freelance career paths on the other hand, have proved to be less sustainable in times of crisis. The analysis contributes to the understanding of why the pandemic is so problematic for freelancers, who depend on their visibility in the very live-based classical music sector. 18 The theoretical frame of reference enables new perspectives on the freelancers’ emotional responses to, and management of, the pandemic disruptions – understood as moments in broader socio-spatial relationships (Holt, 2008). In addition, it contributes to the understanding of various conditions of work and lifestyles as issues of access to places and spaces, as well as control over time and emotional effort (Bourdieu, 1995; Lund, 2019). Even under normal conditions, freelance careers and life’s are difficult to plan. Due to the pandemic, it has even become a “life without a plan” and “one just have to wait and see” (Björn). The problem is that freelance musicians don’t have this kind of margins, and two years of pandemic limbo is a very long time. The findings confirm previous studies, pointing at increased precarious conditions of freelance work due to the pandemic (for example Comunian and England, 2020). The state of the freelancers’ previously established careers matters for their possibilities to outwait the crisis. However, there are some unexpected changes as well, where flexible career paths gain in legitimacy and traditional career paths are increasingly perceived as un-sustainable. This can be understood as a consequence of the foundational ambivalence that is caused by the crisis, where embodied social practices are falling out of alignment (Threadgold, 2018; Flisbäck, 2014). The pandemic situation is simply too absurd, dramatic and chaotic – for the freelancers to be able to keep on as usual. The article contributes to sociology of emotions, as the freelancers’ emotional management is both similar to what they usually do and altered due to the crisis (for example Addison, 2017). The freelancers express strong emotions of loss and marginalisation, due to the pandemic. However, they are able to use these emotions to their advantage, to distance themselves and preserve their professional self’s (Scharff, 2016). While in pandemic limbo, it is not possible or necessary to keep up appearances. This opens up for some more critical reflection, in the same time as it adds pressure on the freelancers to be even more than usually in charge of their motivational drive. The findings point at the advantages of flexible career paths, with a focus on creative autonomy in small-scale communities. The article contributes to emotional geographies and Bourdieu-studies as well, in

18 Often large ensembles who need to rehearse and perform on large stages, audiences are not as interested in streamed classical music.
exploring the relationships between place, space and emotions. The embodied social practices, that guides and regulates the members of the field, are based upon a sense of (one’s) place. This sense for what is possible and necessary evolves, in the case of freelancers, around creating some kind of fixed spot (see also Norholm Lundin, 2022). The case of freelance workers in pandemic crisis is a particularly relevant case for problematising general trends of flexible working arrangement in the labour market (for example Flisbäck, 2020). For future studies, it would be vital to study what will happen with the seeds for change that have been initiated during the pandemic. Policy, employers and stakeholder organisations in the performing arts sector can use the experiences from the pandemic in order to create sustainable working post-pandemic conditions for freelancers as well as permanent employees.

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