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[CONTENTS](#)

[FROM THE EDITOR](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHORS](#)

[CRITICAL ESSAYS](#)

[BOOK REVIEWS](#)

[NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS](#)



## CROSSING BOUNDARIES: ESTABLISHING AND COMMUNICATING A CROSS-CULTURAL MUSICIAN IDENTITY

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### **Abstract**

Identity itself is now widely understood to be a complex issue, in which the individual can self-identify on several levels (meta-identities); these can be described as 'layers' of identity which are constructed "in interaction with others" (Joseph 80). In this paper the author, who self-identifies as a musician, explores the processes involved when musicians cross geographical – and thus linguistic – boundaries, and find themselves, if not struck dumb, then at least limited in the ways in which they can express the technical and interpretative aspects of music and thus establish an identity as a musician in their adoptive country. This research is rooted in the field of identity studies, and particularly Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities," which provides a framework within which to discuss the sociolinguistic challenges to the musician in identifying with their own "imagined community," centered on shared affinities negotiated across multiple cultures. The discussion touches on the concepts of self-concept, self-esteem and self-identity within the framework of *identities in music* (Hargreaves, Miell & MacDonald) and examines the ways in which musicians renegotiate their identities as musicians across cultural boundaries.

**Keywords:** *Musician identity; musicianhood; imagined community; cross-cultural communication*

### INTRODUCTION<sup>8</sup>

It is often said that music is an international language, and once a musician is actually playing, that is certainly the case. But while technical terms can be learnt, differences in cultural expectations or social constructs can lead to a misunderstanding of the individual musician, a devaluation of their professional status and, ultimately, to an identity crisis in which they doubt their own "deeply personal" musical identity (Georgii-Hemming, 208).

This paper concerns a musician's self-identity,<sup>9</sup> and the negotiating of that identity in a new linguistic environment. As the impetus for this research was my own experience, I should explain that for over twenty-five years I was a professional musician in Great Britain, earning my living performing, teaching, running workshops and creating and publishing musical arrangements, before going on to do a PhD in musicology. At that point, I moved to France, a country in which I knew the arts were valued and well funded. If I told anyone "*Je suis musicienne*" [I'm a musician] the response was "*chapeau bas*" [I take my hat off to you] and in our first week there I was delighted to find that, on applying for a supermarket loyalty card, the menu of occupations included '*artiste*' (that would never happen in Britain). But even with this ready cultural acceptance

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<sup>8</sup> I should like to express my thanks to the three anonymous reviewers whose insights over two rounds of revisions have made this a far better paper than it would otherwise have been.

<sup>9</sup> Self-identity, or personal identity, is the way we think about ourselves and our relationship with the world.

of my *métier*, I found it hard to break into the music scene, and it seemed that this was because my musical identity didn't seem to fit local expectations. So, as is often the way with ex-pats, I fell into language teaching, and then translation, and I am now teaching English as a research tool for musicians and musicologists at a French university. But in my heart I am primarily a musician, so in this paper I examine the ways in which language plays a part in establishing this type of meta-identity within the context of a new musical – and social – culture.

The linguistic pitfalls of establishing oneself as a musician became evident as soon as I started playing with other musicians: I confidently expected that, in France, I would be able to articulate musical concepts easily, because if any national language could be considered the 'official' language of music (just as English is the *lingua franca* of aviation) it would be Italian. British musicians use many Italian terms to describe tempi (e.g. *adagio*, *allegro*) or playing style (*staccato*, *legato*, *leggiero* etc.) and I rather assumed that this would be the case across Europe, if not worldwide. Sadly, I quickly found that French musicians are far more inclined to translate these terms into French, so *staccato* becomes *détaché* while *legato* becomes *lié*; such attitudes were to prove indicative of an insular – and proudly francophone – musical culture, the ramifications of which I will be exploring later in this article.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is rooted in the field of identity studies, and particularly Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities," which he originally applied to the "imagined political community" of a nation: "it is *imagined* because the fellow members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members [...] yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 6). This has since been applied to other "imagined communities," and I use the term here as a framework within which to discuss the sociolinguistic challenges to the musician in identifying with their own "imagined community," centered on shared affinities negotiated across multiple cultures rather than geographically anchored.

Identity itself is now widely understood to be a complex issue, in which the individual can self-identify on several levels (meta-identities) which could be described as 'layers' of identity as described by social psychologist Michael Hecht (1993) who leads us "toward an understanding of how our various 'layers' of identity are constructed in interaction with others" (Joseph 80). Self-

identity involves the binary processes of 'projection' (the presentation of self to others) and 'introjection' (a presentation of self to self), which specifies the need to "mobilize and hold onto a coherent image of 'who one is'" (DeNora 62). One can simultaneously hold several self-identities, which can be related to a domain such as music, linguistics, or other professional fields. Self-identity as a musician, however, seems to transcend such boundaries, as making music can be undertaken on a professional, semi-professional or amateur basis which does not necessarily relate to the standard of music-making involved. What concerns me here is not the standard of musicianship but how musicians self-identify, and the effect of this self-image on their self-concept and self-esteem.

In "What are musical identities, and why are they important?" Hargreaves, Miell and MacDonald speak of the creation of *identities in music*, defined as "dealing with those aspects of musical identities that are socially defined within given cultural roles and musical categories" (2). Such identities may be defined on a general level ["I am a musician"] or, on a deeper level, as subjective sub-identities of this core 'musician' identity, by instrument, genre, discipline or activity – e.g. 'saxophonist,' 'opera singer,' 'jazz musician,' 'composer,' 'music teacher,' 'musicologist' etc., – but all would ultimately style themselves 'musician' as a core identity. A musician's self-image ("I am a musician") implies active involvement in music-making, and as such can be disrupted when that activity is interrupted, necessitating a "regaining of self-esteem" by redirecting "the focus of identity away from the group affiliation and toward the self as an individual" (Oakland 2011; 2013). However, even working musicians can suffer disruption of this self-image due to miscommunication in an intercultural environment (Sarangi 1994) and often resort to using discursive means (Brown 2017; Brown, Reveles & Kelly 2005) of reconstructing and renegotiating their musician identity, both in the moment and across the years.

This work also draws on the wide literature on language and identity, e.g. Edwards (2013) and Joseph (2004). Edwards sums up the crucial role of language as a means of cultural communication by highlighting the distinction between the communicative and symbolic functions of language, which lie "in a differentiation between language in its ordinarily understood sense as an instrumental tool, and language as an emblem of groupness, a symbol, a psychosocial rallying point" (Edwards 55). For the musician, a lack of cultural communication can define them as 'other', resulting in exclusion from this 'groupness' and contaminating their own sense of identity as a musician. In terms of musical

communication, one must consider the translation of meaning, and the translation loss encountered during the process by which a musician's identity is received and interpreted by others. As this is in large part due to the musicians' ability to communicate among themselves about the music – the very aspect of their shared experience – I refer to musicologist Albert Wellmer's concepts of the "speech background" and "speech relation" of music "in the wider sense of a connection between musical experience and possibilities, or indeed necessities of lingual articulation, of speaking about music" (Wellmer, 100). Wellmer's focus on "lingual articulation – namely, interpreting, analyzing, describing and speaking critically *about* music" (100) highlights the need for musicians to have a shared language, and this is the starting point for this paper.

#### METHODOLOGY

This research presents a very personal account of my own experience, but I have widened the focus by collecting qualitative and quantitative data from other musicians (n=56) by means of an on-line survey. Initial conversations with colleagues, and students past and present,<sup>10</sup> followed by a Skype interview with another researcher working on musician identity, helped clarify the criteria for an on-line survey, which was then formulated on SurveyMonkey and run for a six-week period in April-May 2017. The survey was circulated by two means: firstly, a link to the survey was sent by email invitation to personal contacts in the field, and secondly, a link to the survey was posted on selected Facebook groups.<sup>11</sup> A professional body (Incorporated Society of Musicians) and a learned society (Royal Musical Association) were also asked to post the link on their own websites.

While some of these groups (e.g. the Incorporated Society of Musicians) involve predominantly classical musicians, most of the groups were chosen because their members/followers are musicians working in a more fluid environment. They comprise musicians of many nationalities and many musical genres, working at all levels from national orchestras to jazz ensembles to musical theatre to cruise ships and lounge bars. This target group tend to play with several ensembles

simultaneously, generally on short contracts and one-off performing engagements, and often with frequent changes of personnel; they also self-identify as either living in an adoptive country (expats) or seeking work abroad and thus crossing cultural boundaries, e.g. working on cruise ships or seeking residencies (longer contracts, usually of 3-6 months). This particular set of circumstances ensured a representative sample of those musicians most likely to have had experience of working with musicians from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds; because I argue that the question of musician identity transcends professional status, questions were phrased so as not to exclude those self-identifying as semi-professional or non-professional.

#### SURVEY DATA

The survey respondents self-reported as professional (42%), former professional (15%), semi-professional<sup>12</sup> (20% and amateur (27%).<sup>13</sup> Of the survey group as a whole, 51% [n=27] had lived/worked in another country for a period of 6 months or more, 19% [n=10] for a period of up to six months; 28% [n=15] had undertaken a brief overseas visit (concert or short tour), while 25% [n=13] had worked regularly with musicians of a different language/culture and 40% [n=21] occasionally. [It should be noted that multiple answers were possible on this question, hence the total of 86 responses for 56 respondents.]

There are of course limitations in using such self-reported responses as raw data, and the anonymity of the survey means it has not been possible to follow these up. Although the majority of respondents report finding creative ways of overcoming language barriers, the qualitative data in the form of comments support my thesis that musicians self-identify through language to a far greater extent than the argument for music being an international language would suggest, and reveal two areas in which this occurs: firstly in terms of the ways in which musicians describe and conceptualize the music itself, and secondly in terms of their own selfhood and personal musical identity.

In a reductive sense, this "speech-background" to the musical experience includes the basic musical elements such as pitch and duration, and also extends to the more sophisticated language required to discuss issues such as the form of a piece, and to the tone and timbre used in the interpretation of these basic elements.

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<sup>10</sup> I have two distinct groups of students – those of all ages to whom I teach music, and those university music students to whom I teach English as a communicative or research tool – so I have qualified these throughout the text as 'music student' or 'English/music student' respectively.

<sup>11</sup> A list of these on-line groups is given in Appendix 1. Survey data are given in Appendix 2.


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<sup>12</sup> A semi-professional is paid for performing but music does not provide their main source of income.

<sup>13</sup> Percentages rounded up or down to the nearest whole number.

CONCEPTUAL DIFFERENCES UNDERLYING MUSICAL TERMS

Figure 1. Fixed do sol-fa

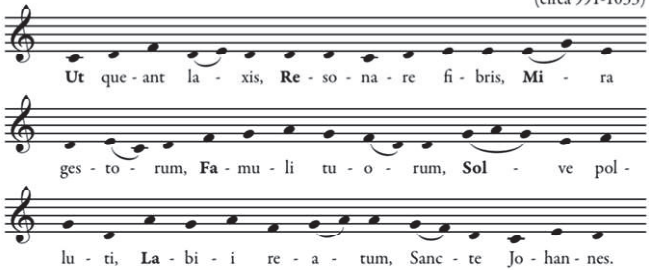


ENGLISH	C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C
[Letter names]								
FRENCH	do	re	mi	fa	sol	la	si	do
[Fixed sol-fa]								
GERMAN	C	D	E	F	G	A	H	C
[ut]								

Figure 2. Ut queant laxis

**Ut Queant Laxis (Hymn to St. John the Baptist)**

Guido of Arezzo  
(circa 991-1033)



Ut que - ant la - xis, Re - so - na - re fi - bris, Mi - ra  
 ges - to - rum, Fa - mu - li tu - o - rum, Sol - ve pol -  
 lu - ti, La - bi - i re - a - tum, Sanc - te Jo - han - nes.

**Translation:**

So that your servants may, with loosened voices, resound the wonders  
of your deeds, clean the guilt from our stained lips, O Saint John.

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version by Matthew D. Thibault, October 31, 2008

Fig. 1 shows the ways in which musicians express even the simplest components of musical language, and these reveal some interesting issues, even between French and English, the two languages in which I work. Musicians trained in the French system use *solfège*, in which the syllables do-re-mi etc. are used to denote fixed pitches.<sup>14</sup> In English each note is given a letter name, which has the great advantage of being sequential, because it uses a known alphabet.

Even so, this sequence is disrupted in German because the note B is known as H, whereas B denotes Bb.<sup>15</sup> I have taught several German music students in France, and we have to make a conscious decision from the outset regarding which system to use, depending on where they expect to pursue their studies in the future.

In contrast with the sequential letter-name system, *solfège* assigns syllables to each pitch, and their apparently random nature can give problems to learners. In fact, the sol-fa system originated in the thirteenth century, when Italian music theorist Guido of Arezzo noticed that each phrase of the plainchant Hymn to St John the Baptist *Ut queant laxis* began on a different note (Fig. 2).

Of course, this musical lexicon can easily be learnt by all musicians, but no matter how fluent we may become in the second language, the way we conceptualize the note names is inextricably linked with the logic within which we originally learned them. A forum post on the site of the ABRSM, the national music assessment body in Britain, echoes this experience:

"I learnt English letter name notation and [...] I now live in France and [use] the fixed sol-fa. However, although I speak French fluently, my brain has never entirely come to terms with the "new" names and I often get them wrong. When I look at a piece of music I sing/hear it in my head using the letter names rather than sol-fa."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The same sol-fa system is used in Italy and Spain.








<sup>15</sup> The German nomenclature merely sought to give each pitch-class a unique name, and assumed an even semitone pattern. Later, when the letter b was employed to effect mutation into other, more distant tetrachords (or hexachords), the German nomenclature was never modified to accommodate it, and its use as a flat sign was simply extended to the other 6 letters while retaining the H/B distinction for what everyone else calls B/Bb. (Monzo, n.p.).

<sup>16</sup> Online forum post by 'Roseau' 8 Jan 2010 on "Sol-fa, Letter Names, And Singing Both." Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music. Online forum topic. <<http://www.abrsm.org/forum/>> . Accessed March 1, 2017.

And another post on the same forum reveals a proto-linguistic solution which negotiates the distinction between the two systems:

"[One of my students] who has perfect pitch in fixed do, regularly has his brain fried by me asking him to call 'fa' 'do' etc. One way he gets round it is to sing fixed do solfa in a French accent and moveable do solfa in an English one!"<sup>17</sup>

Figure 3. Duration

	American	British	French
	double note	breve	note carrée
	whole note	semibreve	ronde
	half note	minim	blanche
	quarter note	crotchet	noire
	eighth note	quaver	croche
	sixteenth note	semiquaver	double croche
	thirty-second note	demisemiquaver	triple croche
	sixty-fourth note	hemidemisemiquaver	quadruple croche

Another basic element of musical language is note duration and, as can be seen in Fig. 3, even in English there are two distinct systems of describing duration. The American system uses the "whole note" as its unit of reference, describing all other notes in terms of fractions of this. The logic of this is impeccable, and in fact makes it extremely easy to relate to the time signatures with which musicians describe the number and nature of beats in each bar at the beginning of a piece: thus 2/4 is easily read as a fraction (two quarter notes), while 4/2 is read as four half notes. The British system, on the other hand, uses the "breve" as its point of reference, and halves this for a semibreve. These, along with the minim, crotchet and quaver, defy any logic, unless they are related to their historical origins in the thirteenth century when music evolved from modal to mensural (measured rhythmic) forms and mensural notation was first being developed. This system was codified by Franco of Cologne in his *Ars cantus mensurabilis*, in which note values ranged from the longest note (*duplex*

<sup>17</sup> Forum post by 'Cyrilla' 11 Jan 2010 on <http://www.abrsm.org/forum/index.php?showtopic=40407>. Accessed March 1, 2017.

*lunga*, or *maxima*) through the *lunga* (long), *brevis* (short), and then even shorter values known as *semibrevis* and *minima* (very small) (Hoppin 337)<sup>18</sup> from which mensural values the modern breve down to the minim evolved. Beyond this, the crotchet is so called because, in its original form it resembled a hook, or *crochet* in Old French, and the quaver because of the quavering effect of a succession of small notes. At this point a discernible logic resumes, with subsequent notes described as ever-decreasing fractions of a quaver as it is repeatedly halved, hence the prefixes semi-, demi-, semi- and hemi-demi-semi-quaver.

The French system takes a different approach, and describes the physical appearance of the notes by shape or color: the only concession to historical precedent is that the *note carrée* means a 'square note' because this is the way it was originally written. Confusingly, we also have a false association between French and British English: the *croche* does not equate to the British crotchet, but to the quaver, even though the name originated for the same reason – its resemblance to a hook. And the smaller notes are regarded as two, three or four times the value of the *croche*, rather than the successive halving in the British system.

So even between English and French we now have three lexicons, because we speak about the basic musical elements very differently in American and British English. And of course there is a different lexis for each genre: we use completely different terminology in jazz from that used when discussing classical music. For example, the chords in classical terminology become 'changes' in jazz, and the classical 'theme' becomes the jazz 'head'.

Between all these genres of Western music we are at least discussing the same intervals between notes, the same harmonic elements. But if a musician ventures into a completely different musical culture, even the basic elements of meter, harmony and indeed the whole concept of the way music is constructed will be utterly different. As one of my respondents told me, "Indian musicians have assaulted me with strange time signatures etc (their system is based on sequences rather than tempo/subdivision)". Also, training methods can mean the music is approached differently. As one respondent who has worked extensively in eighteen countries told me:

"Sometimes their training is vastly different, therefore expectations are sometimes different....Phrasing and treatment of rhythms can sometimes be noticeably different. So these are differences in musical language!"

Some musical traditions are written down, notated, and require a comprehensive knowledge to allow these symbols to be decoded; other musical traditions are learned and transmitted entirely aurally, but may have an equally sophisticated lexis known only to those immersed in the tradition. And of course there is an even greater divide between what we might call literate musicians – those who can read musical notation and have a sophisticated vocabulary with which to describe it – and those musicians who lack such skills. A former music theory student of mine, a pianist who graduated from the prestigious Royal Academy of Music and is currently working in musical theatre in London, told me of his frustration at having to work with 'singers' [he qualified this title with scare quotes] who "don't read a note on the page". In other words, even though they all share a spoken language, they have no common language in which to articulate their musical thoughts and processes. Even so, the need to work together on the musical product means other means of communicating the musical ideas in non-technical language are found, and my respondent outlined the techniques he uses in his work as *répétiteur* – the rehearsal pianist who works with the singers – thus:<sup>19</sup>

"I found myself starting to use more pictorial/emotional descriptions. E.g. not going flat (in pitch) – think brightness/happy sound; more *legato* – thread the notes/dots together with your voice; more diction – spicy/electrifying the tip of the tongue. Everyone is different and I try to find images they can relate to and experiment with it."

#### IMAGINED COMMUNITY

So where does this leave us in terms of the individual musician's personal identity? I find it interesting – if rather annoying – that when explaining the English terms to my francophone English/music students I will often find myself saying "WE say this, but YOU say that," instead of "in English we say this, and in French we say that". This, to me, is evidence of a subconscious awareness that, although I consider myself a member of what, in Anderson's terms, is an 'imagined community' of musicians I still feel the 'otherness' of my musical identity. This is no doubt contributed to by the fact that

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<sup>18</sup> Hoppin points out that "with fine disregard for linguistic logic, the theorists called all of these smaller notes *semibreves*, although from two to seven or eight might replace a single breve" (332).

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<sup>19</sup> Email to the author, April 1, 2017.

I am often perceived as 'other' even within this imagined community.

When I rehearse with my various musical ensembles, any misunderstanding is blamed on a perceived language barrier even though I am totally familiar with the lexis. And in a discussion of the finer details of our interpretation, such as a particular way of playing a phrase, or a change in the timbre of the sound we produce, I have even been told "Maybe that's how you do it (or not how you do it) in England." Other musicians have found that, with rehearsal time at a premium, musicians may simply decide to bypass the language barrier and hope the music will speak for itself. One anglophone professional musician who has worked in China and now Mexico, told me that "Because I was in THEIR country and I was the foreigner, they often skimmed over these issues with a Don't Worry About It attitude. To save time". However, the inability to communicate musical ideas is very close to being labeled a non-musician, whether on one's own account (lack of technical ability or musical understanding) or from a stereotypical understanding of one's origins. French musicians can be deeply suspicious of British musicians, and this is perhaps a reflection of the somewhat insular culture...maybe even a hangover from the view of England as *das Land ohne Musik*, expressed in 1914 by the German critic Oscar Schmitz. The 'analytic burden' (Hall 40) of this kind of "historically laden social identity" (34) has been summed up by Sarangi (414):

"If we define, prior to analysis, an intercultural context in terms of cultural attributes of the participants, then it is very likely that any miscommunication which takes place in the discourse is identified and subsequently explained on the basis of 'cultural differences'".

It would appear that the attitudes I have encountered do not apply – or apply far less – in more international environments. One of my interviewees is a British opera singer who spent twenty years with the National Opera Company in the Netherlands, a multicultural, multilingual company comprising German, English, French and Dutch singers. My interviewee was adamant that she was not aware of any miscommunication, or identity-related issues. However, I would argue that this environment differs from the freelance environment in several distinct ways: in an opera company, all the musicians are full-time salaried members of a discrete group whom those both inside and outside the group can clearly identify. They also focus on a small repertoire, so have a clearly defined musical identity which can be perceived by non-musicians in clearly

defined and understood terms: "What sort of musician?" Singer. "What sort of singer?" Opera.

The same goes for orchestral players, for whom conversations following self-identification as a musician will generally take a prescribed path: "What do you play?" [this can be interpreted as meaning either instrument or genre] and "Who do you play with?" The more definite the answers, the more confident the enquirer is about positioning the musician within a group or subgroup. When it comes to the freelance musician, however, the answers are not always so definitive. For instance, in my previous professional life the conversation following self-identification as a musician would most often be along the following lines:

"What do you play? *"Classical and jazz"* [genres]; *"Flute and saxophones"* [instruments].

"Who do you play with?" *"Well, I have various ensembles, including a duo with a pianist, another duo with a guitarist, a saxophone quartet, and a chamber trio which can be expanded at will (flute, violin, 'cello and piano). I also freelance in orchestras and do a lot of big band work, studio session work and musical theatre. And I teach, and arrange music for ensembles which I publish. And I run music workshops, and I conduct ....."*

This is all completely normal fare for freelancers, but it does not necessarily equate with public perception. And depending on the host culture, such activities really do not appear to compute. As a musician colleague in France told me, *"en France on se specialise"* [in France we are specialists] so the fact that I straddle genres on more than one instrument marks me out as a 'jack of all trades, master of none'. In fact, in my heyday in England I was playing flute, piccolo, clarinet, bass clarinet, and four saxophones, so doing session work was lucrative, because very often hiring one musician to play several instruments, each of which may be used for only a few bars, is more cost-effective than hiring several musicians to sit around during expensive studio time. The same applies to musical theatre, especially for shows from the 1940s and 1950s in which the prevalence of swing and Latin-based numbers means four musicians each doubling on several instruments can play the "reed parts," in which various combinations of flutes, clarinets and saxophones provide a wind section capable of providing a satisfying variety of tone colors. But this pool of uncertainty casts doubt on my legitimacy as a musician. If I play too many instruments to be taken seriously, then – in France at least – that makes me less of a musician rather than more of one.



A singer working in Germany told me of a similar problem, saying that the German Fach system "is so highly structured that performances outside of it seem to confuse,"<sup>20</sup> and that "as a singer trained in the US I was used to preparing a general audition of Italian, French and German selections. While auditioning in Europe I had better results with a more restricted repertoire."

#### LEGITIMACY

##### *Musical Training & Education*

In order to ascertain the legitimacy of any claim to be a 'real' musician, the next question in the 'I'm a musician' conversation may well be "Where did you train/study?" And here we have yet another area in which the answer will not proffer enough information for the enquirer to ascertain the musician's credentials and thus their legitimacy. Anyone who has attempted to translate a CV will know that educational qualifications and training are particularly hard to describe accurately and succinctly. In France, music is not part of the school curriculum, but there is a well-developed system of state conservatoires;<sup>21</sup> these provide an obligatory training in *solfège* (music theory) before the student goes on to study an instrument at their local conservatoire, on which they progress through three 'cycles', the last of which equates to university entrance level (entry to a regional or national conservatoire is of a higher standard and requires an additional audition).<sup>22</sup> In England, where I trained, there is no longer any state provision of instrumental tuition, even though general music education is provided as part of the school curriculum up to the age of thirteen; instrumental tuition is generally through private teachers, and this tuition will include music theory, taught alongside the student's developing instrumental technical competence rather than as a separate subject. The examinations system consists of eight 'grade exams' which are generally completed by the age of eighteen, and fourteen or fifteen for the extremely able; the next stage is a performance or teaching diploma, examined by one of

the major national conservatoires,<sup>23</sup> but there is a big step change between the grade exams and a diploma.

The result of this non-parallel trajectory is that, as my own qualifications are not easily contextualized within the French system I have been listed as "*non-diplômée*", or 'unqualified', despite having three music degrees, a performance diploma and a teaching diploma. And I am not alone: I can testify that anyone trained outside the extremely rigid French system (which is obsessed with *solfège*) is deemed not to be trained at all, as confirmed by these survey responses:

"When I took up a new instrument in France my teacher saw me as an amateur even though I explained I was musically trained and was surprised to see how quickly I learned. Some professionals can see the level without even asking but most make an assumption that you are amateur."

This is echoed by a British musician working in Italy: "Lack of training in *solfeggio* was seen as an indicator of lack of ability to read music." An American working in Europe says: "Because I first studied music at a liberal arts college rather than a conservatory, Europeans don't always understand how rigorous that training can be."

One highly trained British musician observed that this is a common problem, to which the only solution is supralinguistic: "show, don't tell":

"The equivalences of one's music diplomas is [*sic*] nearly always misunderstood from one country to another!!! In my own country, my background is admired by 'people in the know'; in foreign countries, there is very little crossover knowledge of that kind. One must resort to 'name-dropping'! And playing or singing really really well!"

Unfamiliarity with the musician's background can also lead to assumptions being made, and therefore respect being afforded whether or not it is merited. One professional musician, now "a conservatoire teacher, academic and composer" says "I think I tend to get elevated respect because there's an assumption my background is top class, without them necessarily knowing it or me ever putting that forward. Because I'm from a rich country."

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<sup>20</sup> The Fach system classifies singers by vocal range, size, color, fullness of tone and character as well as physical appearance. After considering these variables, one is classified into a "Fach." For more information go to <https://www.ipasource.com/the-fach-system>.

<sup>21</sup> There are regional conservatoires in most towns, departmental conservatoires, and two national conservatoires in Paris and Lyon.

<sup>22</sup> For a detailed examination of French national musical education see Terry, 2008.

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<sup>23</sup> Royal Academy of Music, Royal College of Music, Trinity College of Music, Guildhall School of Music and Drama, and London College of Music.

### Employment status

In England one can be self-employed and earn one's living through any means, so long as one declares it and pays one's taxes. In France, however, this breadth of activity is not allowed: in order to be self-employed, one's 'professional activity' must be stated (one is allowed two: a principal activity and a secondary one). As I earn most of my living as a translator, and as I also teach music and English, the only relevant options open to me are '*autres enseignements*' [teaching outside the specified fields rather than either 'language teaching' or 'music teaching'] and '*traduction*' [translation]. Nowhere can I describe myself as 'musician', because to be a performing musician I need to be either employed (e.g. by an arts association or orchestra) or registered as an '*intermittent du spectacle*'.

This *intermittent* system protects those who work in the entertainment industries and who, by definition, work intermittently, to be protected against unemployment. It applies to technicians (electricians, etc.) and artists (comedians, dancers, musicians etc.) in the wider entertainment field (cinema, theater, television, circus). So long as they have worked about 500 hours in the previous ten months, they are entitled to a daily allocation which gives them a salary and the benefit of the national health program and a pension. Created in 1936 (under the government of *Front Populaire*) and extended in 1969, this very advantageous program is of course extremely costly for the taxpayer and was created to help and support artistic creation in France.<sup>24</sup>

The result is that, in France, those very socially defined categories cast doubt on a musician's credentials, without this particular status one cannot even refer to oneself legally as a performing musician.<sup>25</sup> Other (French) musicians with whom I play regularly similarly refer to themselves as "not professional" because they are not "*intermittent*" even though they have spent their entire lives teaching and performing music at a high level. One advantage, though, is that they trained within the French system, so their compatriots have no trouble situating them within the musical landscape. For 'foreign' musicians, however, this situation questions our 'groupness' (Edwards 55), our right to situate ourselves

within the imagined community of musicians; fortunately, there are other ways of negotiating this meta-identity, and that is through discourse.

### DISCURSIVE IDENTITY

Gee (99) characterizes identity as "the kind of person one is recognized as being, at a given time and place", and I find this a particularly useful way of describing my own struggle to establish my own musical identity. My language-based professional activities of translation and English language teaching currently carry more value in my adopted country than my musical activities, meaning that my musical identity has become devalued, I therefore find myself devising new means of discourse: for example, when teaching English to undergraduate and postgraduate students in music and musicology, I introduce myself as "a musician and musicologist," thus legitimizing my role in the music department. Although they are often shaken by this opening gambit in what they had assumed was a language course run by a language teacher, they quickly accept this premise, because clearly when they ask questions my answers display the knowledge that only an experienced musician would have. But I stand before them, not as a musician, but as a teacher of English, even though I am far less of a linguist than a musician.

Discursive identity offers a means of "examining how [...] identity frameworks are negotiated through discourse, including the antecedent histories, assumptions, and cultural knowledge embedded in any cultural exchange" (Brown et al., 782); in stating that "I am a musician" and that rather than learning English *per se* we will be listening to, talking about and reading about music, but in English, I am "communicating identity via discursive action" (Brown et al., 783) in a way which signals my group affiliation. I was recently amused when copied into some correspondence with a postgraduate English/music student who referred to me as "*le prof d'anglais*" [the English teacher] when he needed me to assess him for a course I was running in his Masters program. When I mailed him myself I told him that I was a flautist like him, and his whole demeanor immediately changed; he became animated and interested in my musical background (declaring himself to be a great fan of the English school of flute-playing; ironically I prefer the French school), evidently relating to me quite differently to the 'language teacher' he'd expected.

However I am no longer earning my living through music as a full-time professional so, to validate this new role, I find myself qualifying this statement of "I am a musician" with a mitigation of my musical identity, as in "I WAS a professional musician." So although I say "we

<sup>24</sup> Redacted from

[http://www.understandfrance.org/French/Specificities.html#anc\\_reintermittents](http://www.understandfrance.org/French/Specificities.html#anc_reintermittents). Accessed April 26, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> A similar situation exists in highly regulated cultures: another British musician complained that "20 years' experience as a conductor rate as nothing in Switzerland if you don't have a certificate" to prove it.

are all musicians," it is through such discursive means that I am signaling that, although I self-identify as a member of the group, they should regard my present role as that of language teacher, albeit one with a thorough understanding of the life of the professional musician they aspire to be. And when playing with my sax quartet, I answer questions about my status by saying I *was* a professional musician, thereby confirming my credentials as a performing musician, even though they belong to a previous life. As Brown et al state, as people "cross cultural borders they learn to maintain dual membership in multiple cultural spaces, thus requiring them to bring unique ways of signaling their identity" (783).

Jane Oakland, who used to be a professional opera singer and is now a music psychologist and vocal consultant, has conducted research among professional musicians forced to make a career transition, for example through being made redundant following cuts in arts funding. She makes the following point: "what is unique to the music profession is the level of commitment made by musicians in order to serve the music" (Oakland 2011, 8) and that "an identity as a musician [...] will always remain in place unless a musician chooses to leave the profession" (8-9). While Oakland implies that a musician identity only applies to those still working in the profession, I argue that even when a musician's working life is disrupted, whether through injury, illness, redundancy or relocation, the need to continue to self-identify as a musician is very strong, and indeed Oakland herself acknowledges that musician identity needs to go beyond professional activity when she says that "it was not the loss of income that was of primary concern for the musicians but a loss of identity" (8). Oakland's research centered on musicians made redundant from full-time employment, but her own research subjects confirm that musician identity needs to go beyond professional activity. As one said, "...it was just music, music, music all week and I didn't know who I was apart from this opera singer" (8). The cessation of professional activity is, as I have already discussed, a bar to expressing musician identity. Can one still self-identify as a musician without making music at a particular level?

The comments of some of my survey respondents, when asked how strongly they identify as musicians,<sup>26</sup> illustrate the "deeply personal" (Georgii-Hemming 208) nature of identities in music and prove to be a variation on a theme: one former professional told me that "Because I am no longer performing or teaching I do not

identify as strongly as when I was active, but I still think and listen like a trained musician." Another former professional said "I teach/have taught professionally and play as an amateur and simply am a musician." Musician identity is not the preserve of professionals, but can be an important meta-identity for others: respondents to my own survey who self-identified as semi-professional or amateur musicians made comments such as "It's only one of my identities but it's the most important for me because it's who I am, not necessarily what I do".

## CONCLUSIONS

I have argued that, although music is indeed an international language, the establishment of a musical identity can be challenged in the face of intercultural communication, and that this can be a deeply destabilizing experience. It is this core-identity, and the need to express this identity, which makes musician identity so important to ones self-concept and thus self-esteem. From my own point of view, this research has validated my claim to this meta-identity in relation to the wider musical community; even though I only play for pleasure now, I find I have felt utterly connected to my anonymous survey respondents, whom I will never meet, much less play with, but I see membership of this group as immutable. It is surely only through the challenges of communicating "what I am" and "what I do" (or at least used to do) that my musician identity is threatened. While my survey respondents did not, for the most part, find their musical identity to be challenged, this may be because they are mostly working musicians, and can thus have a demonstrable claim to legitimacy. That said, the comments they left have demonstrated a wider perspective and have supported my premise that miscommunication and cultural differences can challenge the individual's core musician identity. I regret that the anonymous nature of the survey does not allow me to follow up on these responses, but further, more focused work in this area, especially if this could be expanded to investigate the issues across a variety of musical genres or sub-disciplines, may well lead to fresh insights.

As it is, I feel I have only scratched the surface of the issues facing self-identification as a musician once out of one's home culture. My survey respondents were given several stand-alone options to describe the strength of their self-identification as musicians, of which they could choose as many as they liked, and no matter what their professional status, past or present, they overwhelmingly agreed with the statement "Once a musician, always a musician". This signifies that, even when faced with the frustration on not being able to communicate ones musical thoughts, or to convince

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<sup>26</sup> Q5 in on-line survey – see Appendix 2.

someone of one's status as a trained musician, one's self-image remains intact. However, while the musician can, as DeNora says, "mobilize and hold onto a coherent image of 'who one is'" (62) the problem lies in the inability to fully project one's meta-identity to others. It is the need for others to accept this meta-identity which provides validation in the musician's own mind: if one's musician identity is not externally validated and acknowledged, it becomes threatened and disrupted. Ultimately, the *leitmotif* running through Oakland's research, and supported by my own, is that this core identity must transcend language and professional status if the musician is to maintain a healthy and stable self-image: to paraphrase Descartes, I think like a musician, therefore I am a musician.

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**APPENDIX 1. Survey data sources**

<b>FACEBOOK GROUPS</b>	<b>No. of members (May 30, 2017)</b>
English for Musicians	331 followers
Expat Musicians in France	35 followers
Foreign Musicians in Bangkok	509 members
Incorporated Society of Musicians	4562 followers
Musicians Expats Eindhoven	238 members
Musicians for Cruise & Overseas Work	933 members
Musicians in Paris (1)	123 members
Musicians in Paris (2)	180 members
Musicians Interested in Overseas Work	22,151 members
Musicians Interested in Overseas Work, Middle East & Asia	5,249 members
Musicians Wanted/Available in Paris, France	18 followers
Overseas Working Musicians	9131 members
Romanian Musicians Abroad	4 followers
Royal Musical Association	816 followers
Wedding & Events Harpist & Musicians in Paris, France	168 followers
<b>EMAIL INVITATIONS TO PERSONAL CONTACTS</b> (provided link to survey – responses anonymous)	40 people

**APPENDIX 2 - Survey data**

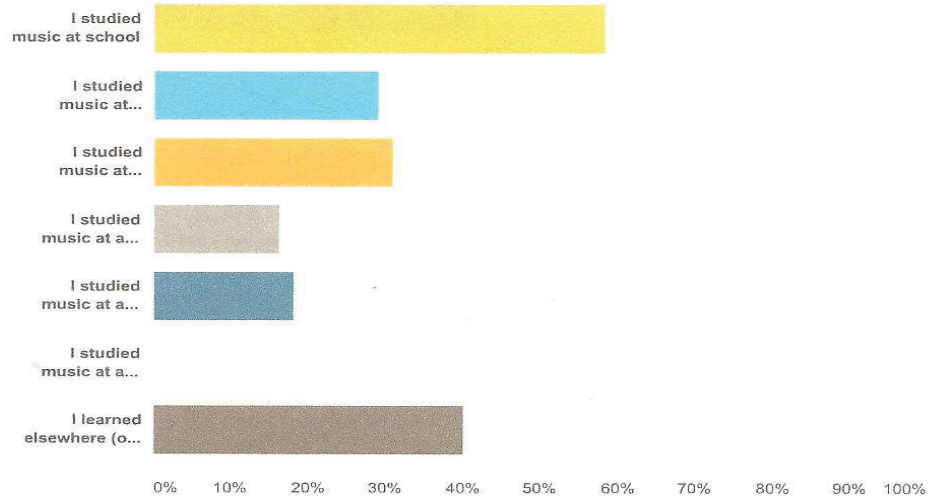
**Q1 What languages do you speak? Please list them according to your skill level in each.**

Answered: 56 Skipped: 0

Answer Choices	Responses	
Mother tongue :	100.00%	56
Fluent :	58.93%	33
Good :	53.57%	30
Basic :	73.21%	41

**Q2 What level of musical training do you have, and where did you receive it?**

Answered: 55 Skipped: 1

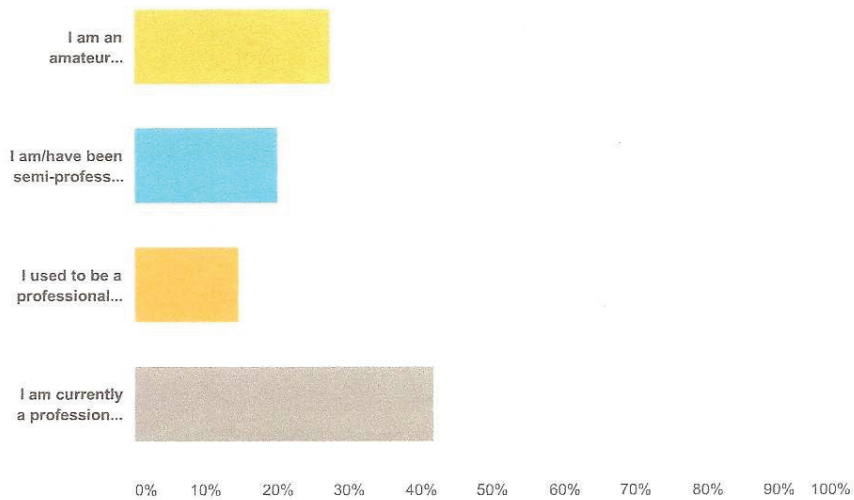


Answer Choices	Responses	
I studied music at school	58.18%	32
I studied music at university (first degree)	29.09%	16
I studied music at university (postgraduate level)	30.91%	17
I studied music at a conservatoire (first degree)	16.36%	9
I studied music at a conservatoire (postgraduate level)	18.18%	10
I studied music at a military school of music	0.00%	0
I learned elsewhere (on the job, jazz clubs, street bands etc.)	40.00%	22

Total Respondents: 55

### Q3 Which best describes your current professional status?

Answered: 55 Skipped: 1



**Answer Choices**

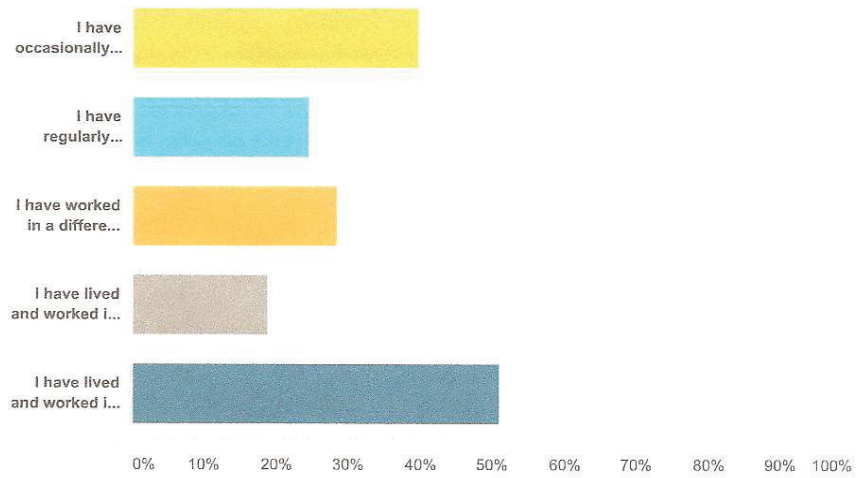
**Responses**

I am an amateur musician	27.27%	15
I am/have been semi-professional (I have/had a day job)	20.00%	11
I used to be a professional musician	14.55%	8
I am currently a professional musician	41.82%	23

Total Respondents: 55

### Q4 In what context have you worked with musicians of other language backgrounds?

Answered: 53 Skipped: 3

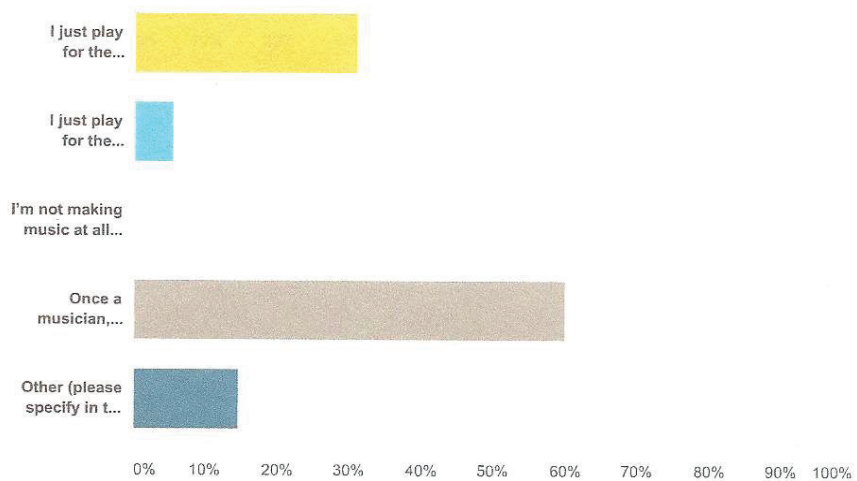


Answer Choices	Responses	Count
I have occasionally worked with musicians of a different linguistic background in my own country	39.62%	21
I have regularly worked with musicians of a different linguistic background in my own country	24.53%	13
I have worked in a different country/culture on an occasional basis (a concert, a short tour...)	28.30%	15
I have lived and worked in a different country/culture for a period of up to six months	18.87%	10
I have lived and worked in a different country/culture for over six months	50.94%	27

Total Respondents: 53

**Q5 How strongly do you identify as a musician? [Please rate the relevance of each of these statements to your own experience.]**

Answered: 53 Skipped: 1



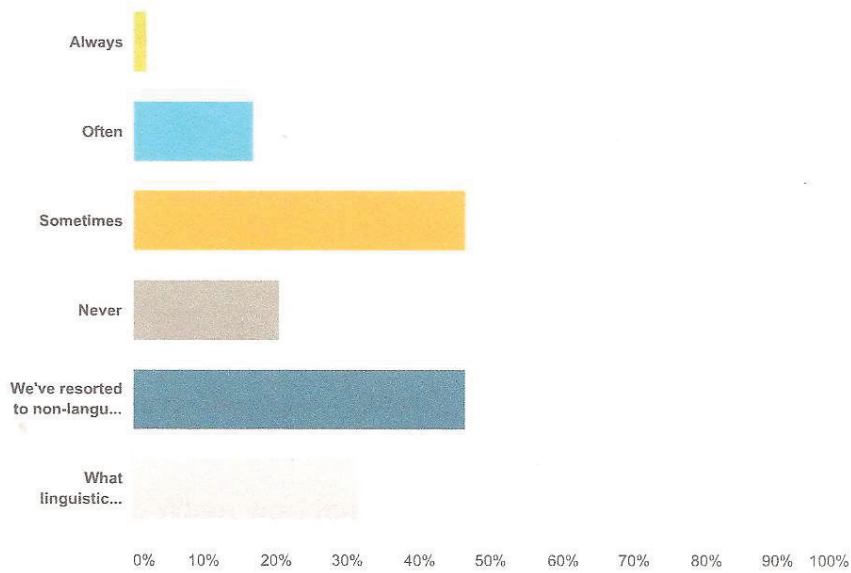


Answer Choices	Responses
I just play for the pleasure of making music, but I'll always consider myself a musician.	30.91% 17
I just play for the pleasure of making music, but I don't think of myself as a musician because I'm not being paid for it.	5.45% 3
I'm not making music at all now, so I don't think of myself as a musician any more.	0.00% 0
Once a musician, always a musician.	60.00% 33
Other (please specify in the box below)	14.55% 8

Total Respondents: 55

**Q6 When working with musicians of other language backgrounds, have you ever experienced problems making your musical needs/opinions understood, e.g. explaining touch, weight, phrasing, abstract terms?**

Answered: 54 Skipped: 2

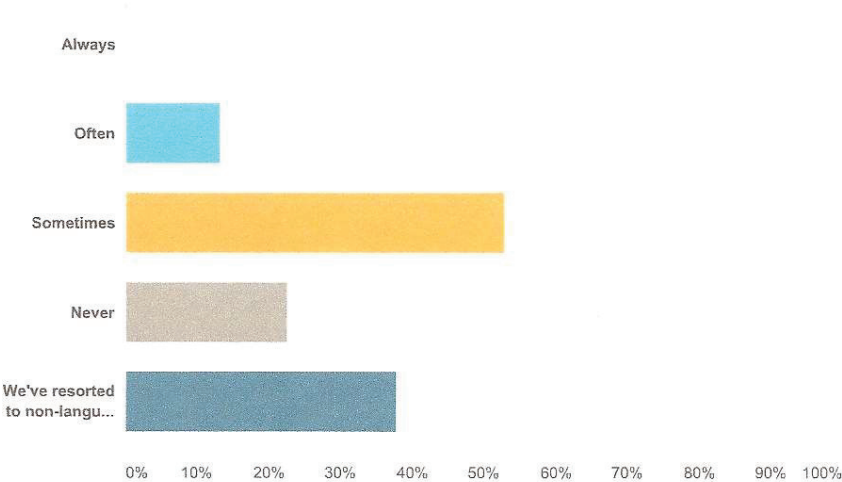


Answer Choices	Responses
Always	1.85% 1
Often	16.67% 9
Sometimes	46.30% 25
Never	20.37% 11
We've resorted to non-language solutions, e.g. demonstrating with our instruments	46.30% 25
What linguistic solutions have you found?	31.48% 17

Total Respondents: 54

**Q7 When working with musicians of other language backgrounds, have you ever experienced problems understanding their musical needs/opinions? You may choose more than one option.**

Answered: 53 Skipped: 3

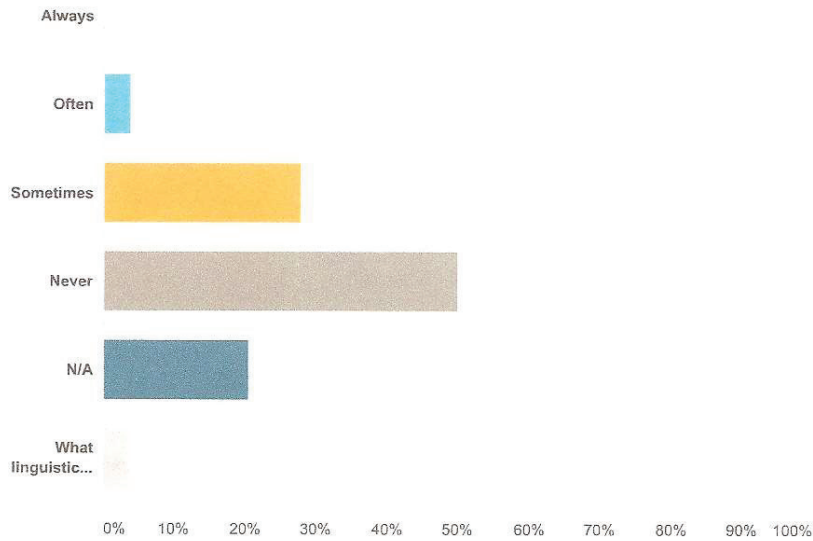


Answer Choices	Responses	
Always	0.00%	0
Often	13.21%	7
Sometimes	52.83%	28
Never	22.64%	12
We've resorted to non-language solutions, e.g. demonstrating with our instruments	37.74%	20

Total Respondents: 53

**Q8 When working with musicians of other language backgrounds, have you ever experienced problems explaining your own musical background? This might be in an interview/audition or on a CV.**

Answered: 54 Skipped: 2



**Answer Choices**

Always

Often

Sometimes

Never

N/A

What linguistic solutions have you found? [e.g. finding a useful comparison which resonates in your host musical culture]. Please specify in the box below.

**Responses**

0.00% 0

3.70% 2

27.78% 15

50.00% 27

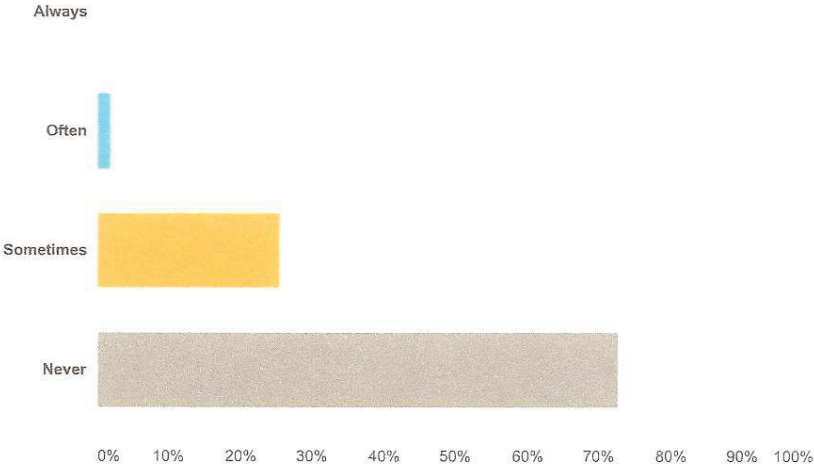
20.37% 11

3.70% 2

**Total Respondents: 54**

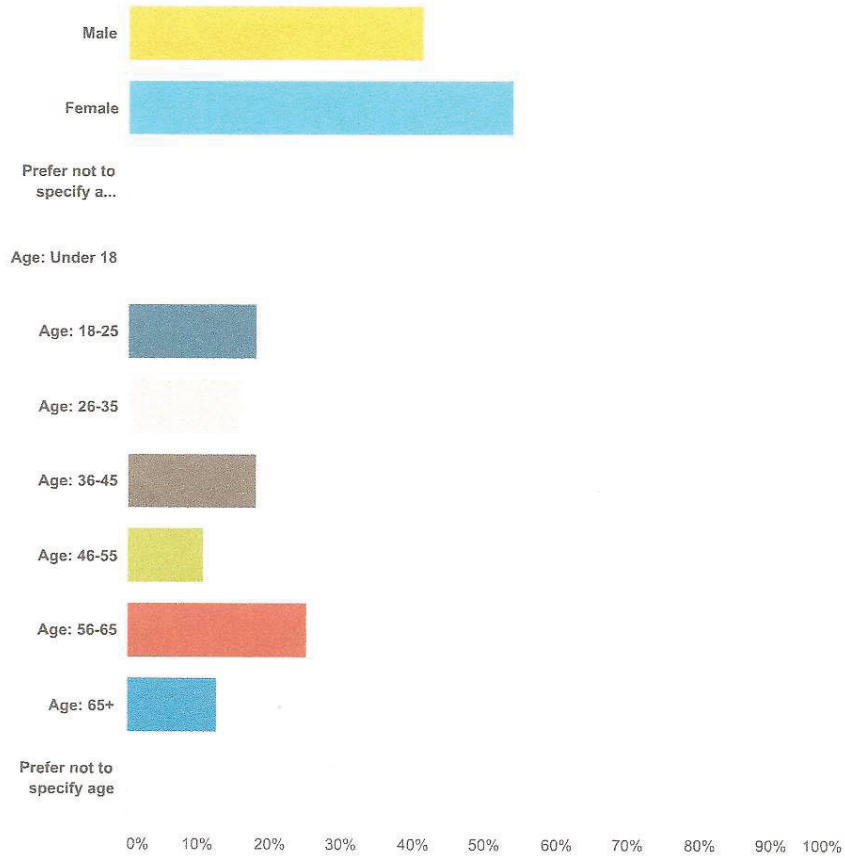
**Q9 When working abroad, have you ever experienced a lack of acceptance of/respect for your status as a musician, because there is no linguistic equivalent to explain your own musical journey?**

Answered: 51 Skipped: 5



Answer Choices	Responses	
Always	0.00%	0
Often	1.96%	1
Sometimes	25.49%	13
Never	72.55%	37
Total		51

**Q10 And finally....the boring but necessary demographic data. Please tick the TWO boxes which describe your gender and age range.**



Answer Choices	Responses	Count
Male	41.07%	23
Female	53.57%	30
Prefer not to specify a gender	0.00%	0
Age: Under 18	0.00%	0
Age: 18-25	17.86%	10
Age: 26-35	16.07%	9
Age: 36-45	17.86%	10
Age: 46-55	10.71%	6
Age: 56-65	25.00%	14
Age: 65+	12.50%	7
Prefer not to specify age	0.00%	0

Total Respondents: 56