

Contemporary composers' changing "practice in context": What can higher music education learn from Theodore Schatzki's practice theory?

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Abstract

While musical practice is more often than not considered through musical repertoires, genres, and traditions, in higher music education, musical practices are further narrowed down to music profession-specific, craft-based competences and learning outcomes. This narrow understanding encompasses the intertwined social and material dimensions that—according to practice theories—constitute and determine all practices. This study seeks a new understanding for practice-based, relational, professional education in context. By “practice in context,” we refer to Theodore Schatzki’s practice theory, in which practices are understood as organized, materially mediated, spatiotemporal nexuses of activities, and in which human coexistence is inherently tied to a context and “sites” of events and entities—*site-ness*. The empirical material consists of interviews of 10 bigenerational, experienced contemporary composers in Finland, including both males and females. By thinking composing practice with Schatzkian practice theory, three intertwined *site-nesses* are unveiled, comprising emerging *locations* (such as small-scale venues and local festivals); *wider scenes or nonspatial sites* (such as digital platforms and the festival scene); and *extended realms* (political, economical, educational, and policy). In this theory, various elements of practice-arrangement bundles constitute the *site-ness* and the complex practice plenum for composing. The *site-ness* thus becomes part of contemporary composers’ professional practice and higher music education which challenges the musical autonomy discourse which disentangles music from people and society. By posing a critique toward higher music education as a merely transmissive mediator of musical craft, this study seeks for a new understanding for practice-based, relational, “music professionalism in context.” It advances theoretical underpinnings of Schatzkian studies in the arts, by arguing that practice theory can bridge the individualistic past- and competence-oriented higher music education with the present- and future-oriented social understanding of musicians’ changing “practice in context.”

Keywords

competence, context, craft, higher education, music, music composition, music education, practice theory, professional practice, Schatzki, *site-ness*

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Introduction

Typically, musical practice is framed through established musical repertoires, traditions, standards, and historically constituted genres. For instance, Bowman (2009) writes that musical practice means a customary, “consciously chosen course of action” that is socially embedded and concerned “with ends and means (with ‘right action’) [. . .] attending simultaneously to one’s own doing and to exemplary manifestations of that doing in others, with the intent of developing or enhancing proficiency” (p. 54). In other words, the criteria for proficiency and expertise in music are connecting the perspectives of an individual’s action and agency, on one hand, and on the other hand, the collectively known musical activities that represent excellence. Although no unified theory of practice exists, practice theories in general can be seen to valorize the “significance of human activity; the nature of subjectivity, embodiment, rationality, meaning, and normativity,” including “the organization, reproduction, and transformation of social life” (Schatzki, 2002, p. 10). While music education research depicts musical practices as embodied courses of human action (e.g., Bowman, 2009), they tend to be presented as more-or-less disconnected from today’s social life, not as constituted and changed by institutions, politics, or other mediating activities around us (e.g., Ski-Berg, 2023). In higher music education, established professional music practices are the backdrop of what is considered “good education”; however, curricula tend to reduce the complexity of practices by taking the highest level of exemplary performance manifestations as the norm for educational success—thus, ignoring the “range of emerging professional practices that seek to expand and deepen musicians’ complex engagement with key challenges in rapidly changing societies” (Gaunt & Westerlund, 2021, p. xvi). In the European context, this reduction is further reinforced by the language of craft-based *competence* (e.g., Rethinking Music Performance in European Higher Education Institutions [REACT], 2021), in which the context of music and musical practice is mainly understood in relation to the past, established repertoires of an instrument—that is, treatises and technical schools that were historically and geographically dependent (e.g., Lawson & Stowell, 2018)—or to the original, “authentic” context of musical practice (Elliott, 1995). A higher music education curriculum that is based on a stable and past-oriented understanding of what is “right action” does not support students’ navigation of the contemporary world of professional music that is filled with contradictory forces, and that “asks those directly involved as music professionals to inquire, renew, and extend their understanding as well as to adapt the practices themselves” (Gaunt & Westerlund, 2021, p. viii).

In the European higher music education system, self-imposed, narrow boundaries are supported by the Bologna process and EU Higher Education Policy, which define field-specific competences and learning outcomes (European Higher Education Area [EHEA], 2016, 2021). Although the original Bologna Declaration from 1999 associated competences with the *development of citizenship* for today’s society, this focus has since been weakened in favor of the labor market discourse after several amendments of the original text. Thus, the current focal points attend to the *development of individualistic competences and skills* that can equip graduates to perform certain tasks and cope with change throughout their working life (EHEA, 2021). Within this policy frame, competences are subject to external measurements and assessments (on education in the neoliberal era, see Biesta, 2010). It is also within this frame that music education has adapted Schön’s (1983/2016) concept of “reflective practice,” that tends to refer to “hard ground” problem setting, to use Schön’s (1983/2016, p. 42) metaphor. The “hard ground” is governed by so-called “technical rationality” (Schön, 1983/2016; in music, e.g., Pozo et al., 2022), in which competences (skills and knowledge) function within and in relation to specific music traditions and established occupations—the widely embraced “right action.”

While the technical performance-orientation is undoubtedly an important side of higher music education, there is an increasing understanding among researchers that the changes in contemporary professional work demands cannot be understood without bridging the dualism between (competent) individual professional actors—understood in this narrow sense—and rapidly changing contexts. As early as the 1980s, Schön (1983/2016) observed that professional contexts are not stable, as professionals *also* need to “resolve conflicting role frames” (p. 41) as “complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflicts [. . .] are increasingly perceived as central to the world of professional practice” (p. 14).

The individualistic, past- and competence-oriented path can also be found in contemporary composers’ professional education (Westerlund & López-Íñiguez, 2022). Researchers have noted that composers’ practices are typically investigated in systematic musicology through individual composers’ artistic works and career landmarks (e.g., Simonton, 1991), rather than as “a social practice.” Besides the identification of the precarious working lives of emerging composers (e.g., Dowd & Kelly, 2011; Smith & Thwaites, 2019), and the realization that only a very select few established composers can survive on composition alone (Sound and Music, 2015, n.p.), little research can be found on contemporary composers’ changing working landscapes and professional practices. One of the few studies indicates that composers simultaneously “navigate multiple expanding professional ecosystems,” thus advocating for higher music education to “support a variety of options in livelihoods” (Westerlund & López-Íñiguez, 2022, p. 76). Researchers have also highlighted the barriers of female composers’ careers and the gendered nature of their career pathways (e.g., Hennekam & Bennett, 2017; Strong & Cannizzo, 2017). It has been suggested that professionals need skills in global networking, communication, negotiating, and marketing, as well as brokering and peripheral participation in real work life, which further requires a critical mindset and social suitability (e.g., Matarasso, 2019; in music, Partti, 2020), and a new kind of responsibility (Partti, 2019)—an expanding professionalism (Westerlund & Gaunt, 2021). Yet, much of professional education in composing continues the tradition of developing musical craftsmanship (Kanno et al., 2022; Westerlund & López-Íñiguez, 2022), thus failing to make the connection between competences and the social and civic contexts in which composers work (O’Farrell & O’Connell, 2013). The question remains, however, whether the competence discourse allows such a transformation in higher music education in which critical engagement with the changing working environment becomes an integral part of reflection in all studies, and not just an added course—which has typically been claimed as the solution for initiating change (Sarath et al., 2016).

In this study, we “think with theory” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2020) about changing composing practices in context to inform higher music education beyond the transmission of past and current craft. By higher music education, we refer not simply to curricula and syllabi but also to their underlying values and principles—the *mental models* (Denzau & North, 1994; Meadows, 2008)—that explain to us how professional education in music works and that shape “how we act” (Senge, 2006, p. 106). By “practice in context,” we refer specifically to Theodore Schatzki’s (2001, 2002, 2014) *practice theory*, in which practices are understood as organized, materially mediated, spatiotemporal nexuses of activity. These nexuses “connect material conditions with people and with work [and] cannot be thought of separately from the conditions in which they exist” (Boud, 2016, p. 160). Schatzki’s approach differs from the pragmatist practice theories, such as that of Bowman (2009), which focus on finding the musical criteria and boundaries for “right action.” It also differs from the practice theories stemming from Bourdieu, which end up with more “homologous bounded realm structure[s]” and in which social class becomes the “organizing principle of the homology” (Schatzki, 2016, p. 5). In music education scholarship, the Bourdieusian discourse has highlighted the power of social class that results in inequality

and a lack of autonomy and agency in music (e.g., Burnard et al., 2015; Wright, 2009). Instead of seeking and articulating the restricting boundaries, Schatzki (2016) is more interested in “action chains” and how change and transformation take place in space–time through the connectedness of “spatially-temporally extended rule-and-resource-structured practices” (p. 7). This study thus argues that professional education in composing and music in general ought to consider the messy change in society—“the swampy lowlands” of professional practice—as the territories where, according to Schön (1983/2016), “the greatest human concerns are” located (p. 42). We suggest considering a practice-based, relational, professional education in context, and an understanding that recognizes professionalism as a dynamic and continuously changing relationship between the profession and its environment—the society (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2015). In our reading, Schatzki’s practice theory can balance the gap between higher music education’s individualistic competence approach and the more bounded practice theories, on one hand, and on the other hand, the emerging present- and future-oriented social, political, and ethical understanding of composers’ changing “practice in context.”

“Practice in context”: Schatzki’s practice theory

Schatzki’s practice theory focuses on the contextual analysis of practices and their conditioning material settings. According to Schatzki (2001), all social phenomena are rooted in practices, and “practices become established through social orders in which various entities relate, occupy positions, and possess meanings” (p. 22). In other words, “social life transpires as part of practice-arrangement bundles” where “human lives hang together through features and components of interconnected practices and arrangements” (Schatzki, 2016, p. 5). In this way, practices and arrangements not only link to one another but also with others and “inter alia, through shared ends or chains of action” (p. 5). In this way, Schatzki’s (2001) theory undercuts “individual subjects as the source of meaning and normativity (value too)” (p. 21) and emphasizes sites that become “the place (both metaphorically and literally) where practice and arrangements meet” (Everts, 2016, p. 50). Hence, the context as a “site” “is where people, organisms, things and artefacts come together and produce social phenomena” (p. 52).

While posing *change* as its main concern—“rather than attributes or qualities of people” (Schatzki, 2019, p. xi)—Schatzki critiqued the idea that practice is guided by the routine ideas of tacit knowledge and implicit rule-following (Caldwell, 2012). Practice as doings and sayings gives priority to the *temporality* of “doings” and what he called the “*site-ment*” (p. 288). This temporality in change—the *site-ment*—was evident, for instance, in the music field during the COVID-19 social restrictions: musical practices quickly became intertwined with and conditioned by new social-material and technological sites, and needed to be adjusted to political regulations that normally are seen as nonmusical and less relevant features of professional practice.

Central to Schatzki’s theory (“flat ontology”) is that it does not separate the different levels of reality (micro and macro levels) but rather describes webs of intermingled practices (Schatzki, 2011). In practice, Schatzki (2011) argues that activity and intelligibility establish meaning and identity (p. 58) and embrace irregular, unique, occasional, rare, novel, and constantly changing doings and sayings (p. 74). Hence, although the theory recognizes practice as linked through practical *understandings* (e.g., the ability to perform, identify, and respond to an action), *rules* (e.g., principles, precepts, instructions), and a *teleo-affective structure* (e.g., intentions, actions, emotions, and moods as well as ends, purposes, projects, and tasks), these understandings do not only refer to the individual know-how—the competence—that lies *behind* human behavior. Rather, the practice understanding is also a kind of “feeling for the game” in the

“timespaces” of practices and “the sites of the social” (p. 152). Hence, “practical understanding as a form of ‘skilful coping’ by rule-following agents may be very similar to habitus and practical consciousness, but it does not determine or dictate what it makes sense for people to do” (Caldwell, 2012, p. 293).

In Schatzki’s theory, a defining aspect of any practice is its *context*—or frame and “site” of activity, “not people, things or practices” (Everts, 2016, p. 57). It is this context in which activities are performed and where entities and activities gain their meaning (Schatzki, 2002). For Schatzki, context (1) “surrounds” or “immerses” that of which it is the context (in this case, contemporary composing practice); (2) has powers of determination, as it determines the entities or phenomena caught in them; and (3) confers value and significance on entities and events in it (pp. 61–63). A *site* is an additional *type of context* “where things exist and events happen” (p. 63). Schatzki further distinguishes three senses of site-ness that determine practices:

- the *location where something is or where the physical activity takes place*, although location is “not a spatial matter alone,” because “all entities and phenomena that exist or occur in broader phenomena and regions have locations in those phenomena or regions” (p. 64);
- *the wider scene or nonspatial sites in which the site occupies a site* in the primary physical sense of space;
- “where something is that *extended and articulated phenomenon or realm of which it is intrinsically a part*” (p. 64, italics added).

Site-ment in the third sense is not only a phenomenon but also a central feature of the type of context that Schatzki (2002) calls a “site”: “a context is a site when at least some of the entities that occur in it are inherently components of it” (p. 65). For instance, a hospital is a site of hospital musicians’ practice when some of the entities (e.g., the ethical rules of the hospital, use of time and space in hospital premises, or specific kinds of patients and their musical wishes) become an inherent component of the practice also setting the criteria for what is considered professional work in this context (see e.g., Koivisto, 2022). In other words, “for something to be or to occur in a site context is for it to be or to occur as a constituent part of its context” (Schatzki, 2002, p. 65). A site is therefore a special sort of context because its “entities are intrinsically part of their own context” (p. 65). Similarly, a hospital musician’s practice is inherently intertwined with the site-ness of the hospital: the specific space and location, the scene of specific ethics, and the health and wellbeing realm.

Research approach

Participants, empirical material, research question, and analysis

This study’s empirical material included a target population of 10 composers based in Finland, all of whom were acknowledged internationally and worked within the contemporary classical music scene, without necessarily having a classical music education or identifying themselves as classical music composers. With this focus, we understand that composing in the Western context has always been linked to a great range of societal changes and, thus, is interesting for higher music education. In this regard, contemporary composers are of particular interest, as their practice does not lean on existing repertoires in the same sense as that of many performing musicians. Thus, their art could be seen as providing “a particularly clairvoyant site to

observe [the] features of social change” (Schatzki, 2014, p. 31). Participants were both male and female, born between the 1950s and 1990s, representing two distinct generations of established professionals, all with years of professional experience. Most of them had received their education in Finland, but half of them had also studied in other Western countries. While we as authors are not composers, we knew the work of the chosen 10 composers and had a collegial acquaintance relationship with some of the interviewees.

The empirical material consisted of semi-structured individual interviews, ranging from 60 to 90 min and conducted via Zoom. The questions prompted the participants’ reflections on changes in contemporary composing practice and their own experiences in working life: How did you become a composer? Can you see any significant changes in the music industry? And, if so, what are the main challenges for you or other composers in the changing music industry? The empirical material was analyzed through Schatzki’s (2002) practice theory to focus on context in explaining the changes within composers’ professional landscapes. We asked, *What are the contexts (sites and site-nesses) of multigenerational contemporary composers’ practice, and how do these contexts constitute the composing practice (the plenum)?* We then further considered how these contexts might inform competence-based professional education of composers and higher music education.

Methodologically, we aimed to reach for a sense of site-ment, but not directly seeking meaning or significations in the composers’ accounts. Rather, our thinking with theory aimed to “activate a circuit to see what sparks, jolts, and puts thought in motion” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2020, p. 3). This plugging in with theory is meant to shift the view from the questions of “what is it?” or “what does it mean?” toward “what is it for?” (p. 2). It is an “enactment of something new that is a constant, continuous doing” (p. 3); an encounter that resists “what we already know that is recognizable” (p. 3); and that is “not a confrontation with a ‘thing’ but a relation that is sensed” (p. 4). Our argument was supported by a two-stage analysis on composing practice as “practice in context” (first, the site-ness, and then, the changing plenum), with the persuasive lead idea of the Schatzkian practice theory’s power to unveil the significance of societal change in relation to the mental models that underlie our understanding of professionalism (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2015) in music and contemporary higher music education.

Ethical statement

The study was reviewed by the Research Ethics Committee at the University of the Arts Helsinki in Finland. The participants provided their written informed consent, which followed the guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity. This research attended to the voluntary nature of participation, including the participants’ right to discontinue participation. The participants were not compensated for their time. The researchers ensured pseudonymization of the material and removed or masked direct identifiers, and restricted user access to the transcribed data.

The site-ness of contemporary composers’ practice

Emerging locations

Reading the interview data through what Schatzki (2002) defines as the location where physical activities take place, a difference can be identified between new emerging locations and traditional concert hall practices. There appears to be a tendency to “get away from the concert

venue setting, towards other spaces and venues like, for example, exhibition spaces” [Mary]. In the context of this study, the rural locations provide variety and opportunities for explorative interaction with young performers. The younger generation of composers, in particular, do not necessarily compose alone and only for existing performing spaces, and their practice can be more socially complex, involving “co-creation” with other composers, collaborating with other artists (as in popular music long before), and working with different stakeholders and communities. Composers put “things and people together” for “performances, exhibitions, or whatever is needed” [Robert]. They therefore actively seek for alternative locations and spaces, as they explain:

[There is] this huge need for things like audience engagement and new ways to engage people that are not normally being touched or being involved with contemporary or any art music [. . .] There is [a] trend that concerts tend to take place in [new] areas and arenas, or on top of existing places. [. . .] This has to do with that kind of location, or let’s say duration-based art [. . .] especially the younger composers come up with installations [. . .] and works that have more than one composer or creator. [Jack]

The interviews illustrated how the new locations in Finland define what and how the composition is made and confer value to the composing practice beyond the traditional criteria and understanding of craft. Time-based sound installations, for instance, intertwine media and people, are designed for a specific location, and underline space–time elements. In other words, the locations are “connecting sites where practices and arrangements meet and intermingle, *in situ* as much as over distance” (Everts, 2016, p. 54). Because the locations also include schools, elderly people’s care homes, small-scale venues (e.g., restaurants, pubs), and local festivals around the country, there may be a strong value commitment and personal preference involved in choices of locations: “I’m not only interested in working with the best musicians out there, but I’m also really interested in working with communities and people” [Mary]. From the older generation of composers’ perspective, “there is like another world, which is alive outside the institutions, like experimental and small festivals and small things going on” [Emma].

The wider scenes, or nonspatial sites

Following Schatzki’s analytical distinction, locations are intertwined with wider scenes, or nonspatial sites, that become concrete constituents of more specific sites and the practices within. For instance, digitized platforms are among the most important nonspatial sites for contemporary composing, to the extent that “composers can post their music to the internet” [Emma]. Although the need for sustaining traditional concert halls clearly still exists in Finland, people increasingly engage with music via mobile phones and laptops, and therefore, technology also shapes the expectations of audiences for contemporary music. Nowadays, people “need more overwhelming experiences as well as shorter pieces” [Jack].

CDs are not there anymore, and the whole distribution of music has changed [. . .] and there is a possibility for pretty much everyone to make music . . . like, 25 years ago you actually had to code . . . and now it’s a lot easier to write music . . . it’s all Spotify and YouTube, and I think it’s still sort of trying to find [. . .] its own thing in a way. [Martin]

Digital platforms become intertwined with the composing processes and change the practice while also being tied to locations, as described by Martin: “Yesterday when we recorded, I had

Skype [in New York], and I was watching [the orchestra] play and I was just following this score and writing stuff [giving feedback] on Skype.” Digital platforms include games that may constitute younger composers’ changing professional practice, thereby creating flexibility. Moreover, composing for games necessarily involves collaboration with other actors, such as producers, music editors, and other professionals.

Composers can also expand to wider scenes regarding musical genres. For instance, Martin describes a situation in Southern Europe where he was asked to compose an orchestral piece in a popular music style unknown to him: “I was horrified at first but [. . .] because I did that, they asked me for more stuff. So, if I had said no . . . I would have lost quite a lot of opportunities” [Martin]. This hybridity of artistic forms is seen in how some of the composers are more confident talking about sound (for instance, when referring to sound installations, or when identifying themselves as sound artists) rather than music: “Sound is nicely vague enough,” Mary reflects, “I feel that the sound itself has something liberating [. . .] we have, of course, very much cultural ideas about what music is.” In this sense, music, as a concept (and in relation to the traditional definition of practice), is seen to carry stronger significations to established meanings and past life, whereas sound (as an abstract entity subject to artistic manipulation) might be more easily contextualized in present locations and time.

In Finland, the wider festival scene allows more experimenting possibilities for contemporary composers’ work, including multimedia, multisensorial experiences, tactility, and sound vibrations: “There is a lot of enormously exciting repertoire [. . .] that in fact nobody other than festivals really can do [. . .] so you can hear these pieces in Finland, [only] at festivals” [Oliver]. The rich festival scene in Finland also expands composers’ practice in terms of livelihoods: “We write columns. We write critiques. We produce festivals and are artistic directors” [Sarah].

Extended realms

For Schatzki, the wider scenes of nonspatial sites and emerging locations are linked to larger and constantly changing extended realms, such as politics, economics, policy, or education, that define and determine what is possible. Composing practice is not an exception in this respect. In Finland, composing is tied to disappearing economic structures, and as the interviewees acknowledge, today’s composers must “be more active in trying to find possibilities to work, and also find the funding for her or his work” [John]. Previously, young composers were regularly offered commissions by the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, whereas now “the scene is splintered/segmented” [John]. Several “subcultures” compete with each other in small circles, which means that composers need to “make [them]selves heard, among all the others, all the flora” [John]. The tightening economic situation in multiple European countries (e.g., *The Guardian*, 2012) and changing consumer behavior globally (Balzhyk, 2021) affect even the traditional sites, and the composer may need to make compromises in the selection of instruments (e.g., based on the economic situation of the orchestra), as Harry explains: “If I would, for example, compose an orchestra [piece] and would like to include saxophone quartet in the orchestra that wouldn’t be so easy [. . .] because we needed more money to bring up somebody.” Furthermore, the intertwining of economics and culture affects how the dichotomy between commercial and noncommercial music is increasingly disappearing. The interviewees describe how this allows the younger generation composer more freedom to find and negotiate between different niches (instead of settling on only one): “If you do your own things and do them well, you’ll always find somebody interested in sharing the experience with you, and maybe sharing some of the money with you too” [John]. Moreover, the practice can also be intertwined with the educational realm:

More and more composers are trying to get jobs also as educators in all sorts of music institutes [. . .] This teaching composition is becoming more and more normal, and there are composers who have been rather active in this field. [Robert]

The changing societal values and policies—what Schatzki (2016) would call “large phenomena” (p. 16)—create both forces that composers might resist and that may provide them with new opportunities. Oliver reflects, “I think for the younger generation, it is extremely important that their music represents their values”; however, he also challenges the ways the realms of changing values and societal topics might constitute artistic practice: “This opens the floor for the unpleasant question that if a composer is writing a climate change string quartet, are you doing that out of an act of activism about climate change?” In particular, the policies that push art toward the causal frame of “curing people” is where a societal trend is seen to affect composing in a way that changes its very nature as art. Sam points out how “political reasons” have recently become part of composition practices, but “shouldn’t be part of all art”; for him, art is not simply for “keeping people healthy or making the life of elderly people more enjoyable.” However, the increasing awareness of how gender is played out in the music field and society at large is seen as an intimately integrated constituent of the practice that also positions composers differently within the practice:

I’m aware that, at the moment, I think I’m getting opportunities because I happen to be a young female . . . there is a big will to change the gender balance in the field [. . .] And it’s very difficult to say what’s right or wrong in this case, and I’m myself very confused about what to think about it. [Mary]

The realms of society’s changing values thus create complex dilemmas where composers can take a reflexive rather than an anything-goes stance.

The changing “plenum” of composing practices

As depicted in the previous section, thinking with Schatzki’s theory allowed us to unfold how “sites” and “site-ness” constitute a composing practice, and how composing practices and the changed elements within are, in one way or another, intertwined with various dimensions of sites that form their “site-nesses.” Schatzkian practice theory allowed us to identify how contemporary composing consists of various elements of practice-arrangement bundles (e.g., festival, musical genre, and funding options) that constitute the site-ness for composing. For Schatzki (2014), “the rock music world is a big bundle [. . .] that is spatially larger than the bundles that compose it” (p. 20). Therefore, although musical genres can be seen as bundles, contemporary composers’ work is not necessarily determined through one genre or stylistic bundle, but rather through what in Schatzki’s (2019) theory is called the “practice plenum” (or a nexus of bundles). Bundles connect and link “to form one overall complex,” “a sum of particular things” that “amounts, *not* to a bigger thing, but simply to a multiplicity. The practice plenum is a plentitude in this sense” (p. 27).

Instead of a strictly bounded nexus of linked practices (e.g., within higher music education) and arrangements of contemporary composing (e.g., concert halls, funding opportunities, small communities of practitioners), the nexus of this more traditional site-ness of composing has today expanded and multiplied—most likely not only in Finland, as can be seen from the extended international working life of the interviewees of this study. This expansion is taking place through numerous arrangements, scenes, and realms that do not follow the narrower,

traditional logic. For instance, a festival location, and a festival scene in a wider sense, allows composers to experiment beyond the possibilities offered by the traditional concert hall location and its established social arrangements. Similarly, the wider scene of the film and video game industries provides not just new working opportunities, but also requires a different kind of learning: the temporal aspects are different compared with “the modern aesthetics” and the work is about “sound design and colors, and these kinds of gestures” [Martin]. Game music connects with “normal people’s ears” and alternative audiences, as “there is a lot more music going on than there was 25 years ago” [Martin]. In Schatzki’s (2002, 2011) theory, it is this site and its “site-ness” that gives meaning to the entities and activities, not the individual composer’s activity of creating a composition per se. In his theory, composing is thus understood as a fundamentally social practice in which “action intelligibility” is intertwined with various dimensions and elements that make sense to participants and encourage them to carry out certain actions and activities in a given situation and location—simply put, professional practice unfolds *relationally*.

One could say that the modernist idea of artistic distance from “the social” (see in music education, e.g., Reimer, 1989) has marginalized composers, as Harry reflected: “Contemporary composers have been more or less marginal after the Second World War.” Previously, composers’ music was “not so well related, [and] didn’t have such a good connection [with the audience]” [Harry]. Practice theory allows us to envision beyond the *l’art pour l’art* musical autonomy discourse, and beyond the theorization of music education that takes, for instance, the social aspects of music making as merely a means to the primary musical end (Reimer, 2009); rather, practice theory directs us to see composing as intertwined with larger, complex social forces and cultural changes in the nexuses (traditionally seen as extra-musical and, therefore, “irrelevant” for the work of a musician). This shift can be seen as symptomatic of our time. For instance, Schatzki (2014) writes, “significant changes in art arise from particular actions that occur in the sea of small shifts and drifts that mark art bundles” (p. 30). Importantly, these small shifts are not purely artistic in nature. For instance, if a traditional arts bundle is constituted by the concert hall locality that establishes the distance between the artist and the audience, the emerging “social art bundle” takes place in different locations (e.g., comprehensive schools, pubs) and includes participants in very different ways (e.g., participatory art and cocreative practices). Furthermore, this type of “social art bundle” can be seen as intertwined with national policies that aim to enhance social participation in the cultural and arts sectors. It also relates to various funding sources that take these policies as criteria for disseminating financial resources—in this way determining who does what and when. Therefore, the changes in the complex plenum may be weak signals of a bigger shift—a shift that some researchers now call the *social turn* in the arts (Charnley, 2021).

In this study, however, the younger generation of composers’ practices is not simply about following trends to gain livelihoods. Rather, their practices push forward change in which there is no hierarchy between the more traditional bundle and the emerging ones. The change in practice is a result of an intertwined, multidirectional human coexistence without clear hierarchies between the scales and level (“flat ontology”). Schatzki (2016) writes, “while practices effect, use, react to, give meaning to, and are inseparable from arrangements (and the entities composing the latter), arrangements induce, channel, prefigure, and are essential to practices (and their constituent activities)” (p. 5). In the younger composers’ reflections, composing refers to “different ways or methods of doing things,” using words such as “fluidity” or “fresh ideas” [Mary]. They distance themselves from the traditional idea of the isolated composer, even calling themselves sound artists rather than composers. The hierarchy between bundles is more evident with the older generation of composers, who are more “bound by traditional

values and less oriented toward working with other people and communities” (Westerlund & López-Iñiguez, 2022, p. 74), as Emma reflects:

The young composers seem to have all kinds of ideas, they are very open. They have the challenge of considering society and climate change and all this. They don't have any obstacles in thinking about all these issues that are not, maybe, in the musical world. They feel the challenge and their citizenship in another way, not as composers who would be somehow *outside* the musical world.

As known from music history, the “persisting,” traditional bundle that sustains the concert hall practice is not an invention of individual musicians but transpired in connection with European industrialization and the demands of the bourgeois class to have access to classical music (e.g., Goehr, 1989). In this sense, the younger generation of composers live at what Schatzki (2016) calls the “uneven front of change” that can, consequently, “begin anytime” and “continually befall elements of and relations among bundles” (p. 31): “You realize how much the world and the values are changing with composers . . . Sometimes it is really nice and sometimes it's explicitly unpleasant” [Oliver].

Discussion

By thinking with Schatzki's practice theory when reading 10 multigenerational Finnish composers' reflections on their professional practice, we have aimed to “reorient thinking” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2020, p. 7) about contemporary composers' professional practice and education, away from the competence and autonomy discourse that disentangles professional music practice from people and the rapidly changing working environment. In what follows, we reflect how a Schatzkian analysis can inform educational practice in context in higher music education.

The site-ness of contemporary composing

The three senses of site-ness in composers' changing practices reveal how site-ness determines what is possible for composers in their work in Finland. First, the *locations* for composing have expanded from established concert halls toward alternative (and rural) places, and social spaces that intertwine people and communities. These locations give a specific meaning for composing, even at the level of craft. Second, the composing practice is interwoven with the changing *wider scenes* or *nonspatial sites*, such as a variety of digital platforms, the hybridity of genres, and festival scenes. And third, (inter)national politics, economy, education, and policies are significantly intertwined with *extended realms*. The composers recognized several aspects of the contextual change: the disappearance of economic support structures for their work; the consequences of the no-longer existing dichotomy between commercial and noncommercial music; the problematic pressure of policies that demand an obvious impact from the arts, or that position art as a “cure” for any societal deficiency; as well as the shifting of other societal values, such as balancing unequal gendered composing practices. Composers' professional education needed to better acknowledge that composers' practice is neither only about music nor simply about composers' individual competences, but rather becomes defined in relation to and conditioned by diverse, constantly changing, and thus uncertain intertwined site-nesses—in other words, contexts.

The complexity of composing plenum

Composing practice as “practice in context” thus depicts the complexity of composers’ work in relation to changing society. It challenges the Bologna-driven competence discourse and the conservatoire tradition, where the nexus of practices and arrangements—the “conservatoire bundle”—is based on the master-apprenticeship model (Poza et al., 2022) and the transmission of musical craft. In this tradition, the “musical bundle” (mostly defined through genre and concert hall practice) is thought to be the entire plenum in its complexity and multiplicity. When thinking with Schatzki’s theory, the composers’ practice plenum comprises multiple bundles that fundamentally intertwine any singular musical, craft-related, and genre-related bundle. This intertwining takes place in different ways, depending both on how the context plays out and which path individual composers choose. The younger generation of composers described this multitude well; however, they also reflected on how their professional education had not been able to sufficiently prepare them for the complexity of “real” practice and career building (in line with Kanno et al., 2022; López-Íñiguez & Bennett, 2020; Westerlund & López-Íñiguez, 2022). Thus, the narrow conservatoire understanding of genre as plenum (i.e., as representing practice) can limit future musicians’ ability to identify the multitude of personal possibilities in their working life in different contexts—and in this way restrict the envisioning and realization of their artistic contribution to and personal creative engagement with changing society.

Employability of composers

Researchers have proposed a wider perspective on how to conceive employability in relation to the narrow competence discourse. For instance, Tomlinson (2017) suggests taking a broader perspective beyond merely technicist issues in engaging with people, arguing that various abilities convert “into job market outcomes and that this process is played out in the various *contexts* that invariably shape the extent to which people’s employability can be actualised” (pp. 5–6, italics added). Therefore, employability is not simply about individuals’ potential and skills, but also about the social and economic contexts that enable this potential to be realized (Tomlinson, 2017; see also, Forrier & Sels, 2003; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). Researchers recognize, for instance, “social suitability” as one important aspect of employability (Lindberg & Rantatalo, 2017). If professional education of composers can pave the way for students to understand employability as a process played out in various contexts—practices and arrangements determined by various intertwining locations, scenes, and realms—it is possible to identify how various new emerging sites and site-ments start changing and constitute each individual composer’s horizons for future employment, including fulfilling artistic possibilities. Importantly, the changing “practice in context” may involve attitude changes, a shifting sense of one’s situatedness in society. Moreover, this involves the development of learner identity (López-Íñiguez & Bennett, 2021) toward *who* one wants to be and become as a composer in contemporary society, and embracing the uncertainty of what that might entail—so not only *knowing* the name of the game but also actually agentially *playing*, or alternatively *resisting*, the game.

Relationality of composing practice

Schatzki’s practice theory not *only* “accounts for the strong social influences on our individual cognition, consciousness, and states of mind,” or “the social sources of our knowledge, values,

and even emotions,” or for “how a society, culture, or subculture is organized, reproduced, transmitted, and transformed,” as Regelski (2016, p. 11) writes; it *also* reveals how artistic activities and practices intertwine with, and are constituted and determined by, various dimensions of human life. Schatzki’s practice theory, alongside the interviews in this study, shows how musical practice is not simply about “enhancing proficiency” (cf. Bowman, 2009, p. 54; see also Elliott, 1995)—in the sense of musical skill advancement in relation to musical tradition—but how the interconnections with material locations, nonspatial wider scenes, and realms can form the multitude of the music and composing plenum without simply following the logic and principles of any musical genre. “Practice in context” can be, indeed, seen as the “swampy lowlands” of professional practice, where “the greatest human concerns are” (Schön, 1983/2016, p. 42) and where responsible relationships between the profession and society can be created. Following Schatzki (2016), the explanatory interest moves to cover not only how composing or the learning of composing works and persists but also “how it has changed or is changing” (p. 22): “What is desired, in other words, is an account of the formation, stability, evolution, and dissolution of the phenomena involved” (p. 22). While one could think that the site-nesses and plenum of the practice of contemporary composers can be covered through an added course where students learn, for instance, skills of engaging with communities, Schatzki’s theory suggests a more fundamental shift. It directs higher music education toward reflecting the impact of multilevel societal changes, and in this sense away from narrow competences and one-size-fits-all curricular models toward composer students’ individual processes of ethico-moral societal positioning and responsibility, professional identity construction, as well as issues of employment and livelihoods.

Toward an educational practice in context

It is noteworthy that Schatzki’s theory does not directly advise how musical practice could be a *transformative practice*; in this way, “practice in context” does not inform if contemporary composing practice in context is a *praxis*—praxis understood as practice in its *critical mode* and involving a transformative moral and social justice dimension (Westerlund & Partti, 2018; Westerlund, 2019; see also Mahon et al., 2020, p. 23). The Schatzkian practice theory unfolds how changes in professional music practice are not purely musical but are interwoven with other societal, contextual changes that—to a degree—determine composers’ professional futures. For practice in higher music education to be an *educational practice* and praxis (instead of mere training into the past or present realities), it requires ethical and moral reflexivity and professional responsibility which also tend not to gain room in competence-driven higher music education and its underlying mental models. This, however, is a topic that has been discussed elsewhere (Westerlund, 2019; Westerlund & Gaunt, 2021; Barrett & Westerlund, 2024; Westerlund & Karttunen, 2024).

Concluding thoughts

This study has envisioned higher music education beyond the competence-guided mental models using data from one country-specific European context and thinking with Schatzkian practice theory. When thinking with Schatzki and returning to Schön’s (1983/2016) metaphor, leaning solely on the “hard ground” of practice in which technical competences provide the pathway to professional success in music is not only short-sighted, but perhaps also unwise. Engaging with the “swampy lowlands” and positioning oneself in relation to the rapid changes in society advances the understanding of the concrete social and material contextual

embeddedness of music organizations and professional music practices—the site-ness of it. Naturally, this study’s site-ness refers mostly to the particular events, developments, and changes in one particular country. However, these details are not meant to provide practical models but exemplifications of what the theory leads us to recognize and identify in any context. Moreover, although this study is delimited by a horizontal view of composers’ practice in general (“flat ontology”) and does not focus on individual agency (see, however, Westerlund & López-Íñiguez, 2022), it may aid in critically rethinking the relationship between the composing profession and society—in this way, both strengthening music professionalism in context and putting the notion of musical autonomy in a temporal context. While the traditional discourse of musical practice and music context may still be valid and appropriate for use in many situations of repertoire-based higher music education, this study has aimed to balance it by developing a more fundamental understanding for practice-based, relational, professional education in context—an understanding that, ultimately, recognizes music professionalism as the dynamic and continuously developing future-oriented relationship between the profession and society.

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