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Visually communicating exclusiveness: how specialist music secondary schools in England represent themselves on the web

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ABSTRACT
This article examines how specialist music secondary schools in England present themselves on their websites and social media platforms. We consider visual communication codes and how such patterns reflect cultural distinctions and social boundaries. Multimodal critical discourse analysis is used to demonstrate how the choice of semiotic resources convey the meaning of specialisation in a socially exclusive manner. Although the schools in question use different resources, similarities in function can be noted in their self-promotion. A school's social matrix and use of classical aesthetics are conveyed through non-verbal, visual communication. An elite code associates advanced musical training with certain principles of behaviour and social values. Those, in turn, represent class-based distinctions, cultural boundaries, and characteristics of privileged education.

Introduction

Publicly-supported specialist music secondary schools are found in educational systems across the Western world. One common feature of such educational pathways is their link to future conservatory studies. While arts education institutions often proclaim to be open for everyone with a special talent, research has shown that specialist programmes generally tend to be populated by children from affluent families (e.g. Gaztambide-Fernández, Saifer, and Desai 2013). The skewed recruitment pattern depends on the operation of various socio-economic mechanisms. Thus, specialised arts programmes are likely to be tailored to the preferences of culturally elite factions within the middle-class (Bull 2019; Gaztambide-Fernández and Parekh 2017). Financially, well-off families are also positioned to utilise their assets to navigate the admission process (Ball 2003; Reay, Crozier, and James 2011). Since entrance examinations for specialist music programmes favour those already familiar with Western art music, such an educational pathway is a more viable option for those already privileged (Wright 2015).

The uneven access to music education at various levels of the educational system has been well-researched. However, the issue of how cultural and social distinctions are conveyed in advertising music education programmes has been under-explored. Websites and social media platforms are the school brochures of the present, and they include multimodal messages of what a specialist music programme is, and for whom it would be appropriate. Thus, a school's online platforms may embody communication codes likely to reflect cultural boundaries and class-based distinctions that promote self-selection among targeted applicants.

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Specialist music secondary schools employ online representations that delineate their own meaning of specialisation. We consider how webpages use semiotic resources to visually convey their perspective and selectively attract the students they seek. The research questions we pose are twofold: (1) How is visual communication used to convey the meaning of specialisation? (2) In what ways do a school's choice of semiotic resources contribute to a sense of exclusiveness? The overarching sociological issue is how multimodal communication may contribute to the cultural and social reproduction of music education.

The present paper is delimited to the context of England and to those specialist music secondary schools that are included in the British government's Music and Dance Scheme (Department for Education 2021), namely Chetham's School of Music (Manchester), the Purcell School for Young Musicians (Bushey), Wells Cathedral School (Wells, Somerset), and the Yehudi Menuhin School (Stoke d'Abernon). These four private, fee-charging, day and boarding schools have at least three significant similarities: First, they are located in England. Second, their highly selective admissions policies are based on an applicants' artistic performance, rather than academic merit. Third, while traditional boarding schools may provide support to less wealthy families, applicants to specialist music schools may receive a reduced fee due to a family's gross income. Such financial support is made possible by the government's Music and Dance Scheme.

Literature review

A considerable literature exists on the strong relationship between social class structure and educational systems. Such reports generally focus on the positional advantage of the middle class. Children from wealthier families are more likely to receive support at home than their working-class peers (Reay and Ball 1998; Vincent and Ball 2007). They are also typically more disposed to recognise the communication codes embedded in schooling (Bernstein 1975, 2000). As a result, students from less affluent homes are at an additional disadvantage when it comes to educational pathways.

Class-based differences are enhanced in diversified and marketised school systems (Ball 2003; Reay, Crozier, and James 2011). Parental choice allows middle-class families to take advantage of their cultural capital in weighing their various educational options (Power et al. 2003). Family background is of particular importance when applying to prestigious schools that have entrance requirements for admission. Better educated parents typically pay attention to submission deadlines; they are capable of filling out application forms properly; and they can provide their children with support in preparing for entrance examinations (Lareau, Evans, and Yee 2016; Weininger, Lareau, and Conley 2015). Obtaining admission to a specialist music school is thus likely to be associated with a student's socio-economic background. However, context may also be a factor because the relationship between social structure and educational choice may differ from one music programme to another (Ilari 2013; Lilliedahl 2021).

In addition to financial resources, social class also has an impact on enrolment in extracurricular activities (Cho 2015; Elpus and Abril 2019). Participation in arts and sports is typically associated with middle-class lifestyles (Covay and Carbonaro 2010; Lareau 2011; Vincent and Ball 2007). Since children from affluent families are more likely to be given private or publicly-supported music lessons than those from poorer homes, they may accrue an advantage in musical competence over time. As a consequence, specialist music programmes are more likely to enrol those students who are already privileged (Gaztambide-Fernández, Saifer, and Desai 2013; Wright 2015; Wright and Davies 2010).

Specialist music programmes may be attractive to parents and their children in various ways. For some, a music track may be the pathway to a conservatory. For others, a specialist programme may be seen as an affiliation with a high-status institution that is known for strong academic performance. In both regards the context of specialist training may provide a 'mutually encouraging and competitive atmosphere' (Green and Kynaston 2019, 8). Moreover, middle-class parents may be attracted to the home–school relationship and the cultural aspects of the music programme,

including the development of self-confidence, autonomy, discipline, musical achievement, and academic excellence. Thus, specialisation in music may be seen as a legitimate educational context, even for those who do not intend to become professional musicians (Bull 2019; Hall 2018; Lilliedahl 2021; Saifer and Gaztambide-Fernández 2017).

A close connection has been noted between middle-class characteristics and the cultural codes of Western art music (Bennett et al. 2009; Bull 2019; Hall 2018; Wright 2008). Since those norms often constitute the basis for specialist music schools, culturally resourceful middle-class families are at an advantage. They are more likely familiar with 'the rules of the game' and may consider themselves appropriate applicants.

Unequal access to specialist music programmes may also exist due to ethnically diverse preferences. Since applicants must demonstrate skills and manners in accordance with culturally acceptable standards, the weight given to collective norms of Western art music may explain the underrepresentation of ethnic minorities (Gaztambide-Fernández, Saifer, and Desai 2013). When Euro-American aesthetics are considered the frame of reference, 'non-Western' music risks being identified as 'otherness' and prospective students may considering themselves as being the 'illegitimate Other' (Bradley 2007; Drummond 2005; Schippers 2009). However, this conclusion assumes a strong relationship between one's musical preferences and ethno-cultural origin. Recent studies suggest that the situation is more complex due to transcultural contact and social mobility (Ford 2021; Karlsen 2017; Sæther 2010). Discussions of multiculturalism also tend to reflect preconceived notions of stable identity theories and a stereotypical view of cultural roots.

In addition to a mechanism of self-exclusion, entrance examinations can counteract diversity. While a school's admission policy aims to selectively offer their educational services to the most talented applicants, entrance examinations for music institutions may, in fact, assess cultural predisposition and social suitability rather than natural ability or musical aptitude (Bull 2019; Gaztambide-Fernández, Saifer, and Desai 2013; Sandberg-Jurström, Lindgren, and Zandén 2022).

Schools tend to be culturally and socially regulated by a code. This tacitly transmitted and acquired code presupposes a particular orientation to meaning, or 'gaze', and constitutes 'the rules of the game' (Bernstein 1975, 2000). Maton (2014) has denoted 'Specialization Codes' as based on principles of epistemic relations and social relations. Epistemic relations have to do with whether specialised knowledge, skills, and procedures are emphasised or downplayed. Social relations, by contrast, refers to the relative importance of a student's attributes, such as having aesthetic taste and natural talent. Taken together, specialist music secondary schools in England likely represent an 'élite code' in which both epistemic and social relations are strong (Lamont and Maton 2008, 2010; cf. McPhail and McNeill 2019). The elite code can be presupposed to have an impact on prospective students as to their self-esteem and their considerations for applying to a specialist programme. While such a hypothesis may need further research, code theories provide a useful tool for examining distinctions in educational practices. Nevertheless, the methodological resources for analysing multimodal forms of website communication are underexplored. We propose that the school's official website and participation of social media platforms provide a useful point of departure. To study the relationship between the content of websites and its cultural meanings, we employ the conceptual framework of social semiotics and a multimodal approach to critical discourse analysis.

Theory and method

Multimodal Critical Discourse Studies (MCDS) share the objective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in examining how discursive articulations in text reflect ideology, power, and inequality (Machin 2013). Thus, CDA and MCDS arise out of social problems with a

communication dimension. They each take the perspective of underrepresented social groups, analysing how those in power exclude people and contribute to social inequalities (van Dijk 1993).

The social semiotic approach has contributed to the field of discourse analysis by drawing on the concept of multimodality. While spoken and written language is usually considered the basis of communication, social semioticians argue that meaning is something created in the blending of various semiotic resources or modes that constitute discourse (Kress 2010; Machin 2013). Different modes (such as written language, images, music, or clothing) 'offer different potentials for making meaning' (Bezemer and Kress 2016, 10). The multimodal interconnection of various forms of communication provides condensed meaning that is greater than the sum of its parts (Kress 2010; Kress and van Leeuwen 2006).

A web designer (as sign-maker) has a meaning (the signified) that is to be conveyed. Semiotic resources with the ability to communicate intended meaning are the ones chosen, together with the modes that best serve the purpose (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). Web design is thus an act of aesthetic meaning-making, with aesthetics itself a matter of cultural and social distinction:

> Aesthetics as the politics of style – with style as the politics of choice and ethics as the politics of (e)valuation – allows me to ask what kind of viewer/reader/visitor, is imagined, with what tastes and habitus, what lifestyle, what age/generation, what gender. (Kress 2010, 172–173)

Kress's understanding of aesthetics is analogous to that of Bourdieu (1984), that is, taste is a way of classifying things and people. The choice of semiotic resources is, therefore, always motivated by one's interest and taste, and such preferences are in turn associated with culture and social class.

Music also plays a role in the multimodal articulation of social belongings, power, and ideology (McKerrell and Way 2017; van Leeuwen 2012). However, our concern here is with the way semiotic resources are embedded in visual communication, since still and moving images constitute a major part of web design. Visuals have the ability to convey subtle communication codes in ways written text cannot. van Leeuwen (2001) argues that such a mode of representation typically encloses a 'hidden meaning' about the ideas and values that the people, places, and practices depicted 'stand for?' or 'are signs of' (96–97).

> Photographs are particularly good vehicles for such meanings, because they naturalize them. They can be thought of as just 'finding' these meanings on the street, as it were, rather than 'constructing' them. And they can also be thought of as not quite 'spelling out' their message, not saying it 'in so many words', so that that message can be construed as 'read into it' by the viewer, rather than as communicated by a powerful social institution. (van Leeuwen 2001, 97)

To understand how visuals work, we must distinguish between two Barthian principles of semiotics: *denotation* and *connotation* (1973, 1977). Denotation refers to the literal depiction of objects and subjects and is the first layer of meaning of a sign. For example, the school website viewer may recognise the depicted person as a student at the school, playing a musical instrument while taking part in a rehearsal, even though the viewer does not know the name of the student or how the instrument should be played. While such an act of denotation is based on one's individual experience, there are historical understandings and culturally specific symbols that determine meaning potentials (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006; van Leeuwen 2001). These conventions constitute the grammar of visual design and give classificational representations of conceptual relations and social interactions between people, places, and practices. Such a second layer of meaning is the act of connotation, that is, the culturally determined associations of recognition (van Leeuwen 2001).

Connotative meanings may be conveyed in a variety of ways, such as through attributes and stereotypes. *Attributes* are contextual-dependent and have the potential to associate a person with a particular persona or affiliation (van Leeuwen 2001). In the context of specialist music schools in England, for example, the denotation of 'students in headscarves' will probably provide

the connotation 'inclusive of immigrant students' or 'multiculturalism', while the headscarf would not have conveyed any significant meaning if the images had represented a school in the Arab world.

Stereotyping is a standardised way of depicting something to provide a common understanding and achieve generality. Such visuals provide meanings and communicate the intra- and extra-musical characteristics of specialist music education. In this way, stereotypical views may reflect the interest of a particular social group and be ideological in reproducing power relations between people (van Leeuwen 2001).

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) identify common strategies for visually representing social inequalities. For example, in photography, a long shot typically represents social distance. Disempowerment may be achieved by placing the viewer in a low-angled position. Gaze is also of importance because the feeling of being addressed or urged to do something depends on whether the person depicted is looking at the viewer or not.

In addition to such strategies, van Leeuwen (2008) indicates different ways images may reflect categorisations to convey a meaning of 'like us' or 'not like us'. For example, social exclusion can be visually implied by failing to represent a particular social group. Illustrations may portray legitimate roles and appropriate actions in depictions of music making, thereby showing meaningful signs of the presupposed order. By examining visual representations of social relations, we can understand how specialist schools try to position themselves in the field of music education and address the website viewer in a distinctive, targeted way.

Data collection and analysis

Once we had selected the four previously mentioned specialist music schools in England, we took a pluralistic approach to data collection and analysis. We concentrated on the website's homepage, the 'about us' page, and information regarding admission and application procedures. Then we searched for advertising and presentation videos on YouTube, and we made a content analysis of recent posts on Facebook and Instagram.

We proceeded to analyse still and moving images based on principles of denotation and connotation, and we scrutinised photographic techniques for categorising, distancing, and stereotyping. Our findings were categorised into three ways of making meaning: (a) places, the visual representation of a specialist school; (b) people, the visual representation of special students and significant others; and (c) practices, the visual representation of specialist training. The photographs included in the Findings section are typical examples of how semiotic resources are used in these three types of meaning making. Since websites are constantly changing, internet links to other examples would not be useful. Instead, readers are encouraged to visit an individual school's web platform to draw their own conclusions.

A school's public conduct raises ethical issues regarding reasonable expectations of publicity (AoIR 2012; Berg 2015; BSA 2016; NESH 2019). Since the schools in our study have availed themselves of public internet platforms to promulgate their views on specialist music education, our analysis of their official texts and visuals does not breach any confidentiality. In order to maintain transparency in our study, we have exercised due diligence in acknowledging authorship and copyright. Thus, institutions have been named and the screenshots that have been displayed are supported by hyperlinks. Such references have been kept to a minimum, however, to avoid unnecessarily singling out specific institutions. The images in Figs. 1, 2, and 3 have been reproduced in accordance with standards of fair use for the purpose of scholarly criticism (GOV.UK 2021).

Our observations have scrutinized representations of specialised music education that have been placed in the public arena, rather than personal data, individuals, or the schools themselves. We examine how institutions have used semiotic resources to depict their understanding of specialised

Figure 1. Screenshot of the homepage, Wells Cathedral School, https://wells.cathedral.school.

music education. Our intention was not to critique these institutions or their advertising, but to point out issues on the societal level of analysis.

Findings

Our findings demonstrate that specialist music secondary schools convey the exclusive meaning of specialisation in three interconnected ways by the visual representations of places, people, and practices. However, there are distinctive differences both within and across the schools.
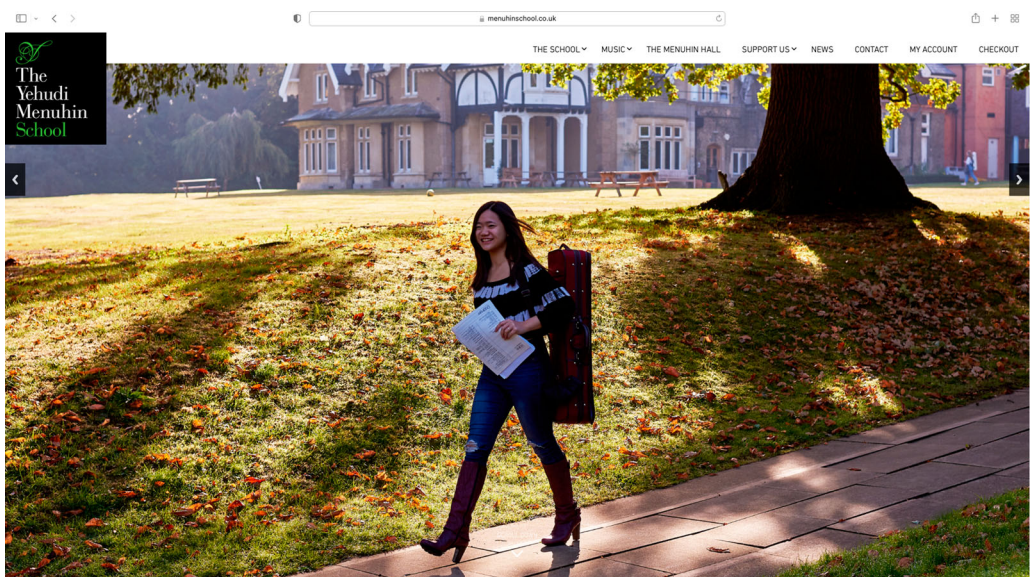

Figure 2. Screenshot of the homepage, the Yehudi Menuhin School, https://www.menuhinschool.co.uk.

Places

Schools seek to visually portray their superior status in various ways. Displaying one's physical resources is a fundamental strategy. For example, the homepage of the Wells Cathedral School features a series of photographs of venerable buildings and roomy halls. Against this background, the students who are depicted and the website viewer are placed in an inferior position. In Figure 1, the school's preeminence is emphasised by a long shot in which students are surrounded by centuries-old structures. The solid walls seem to connote moral stability, classical values, historical significance, traditional pedagogy, and a rigorous academic environment.

Another way surroundings make meaning is in showing a bucolic, non-urban environment. In Figure 2, the homepage of the Yehudi Menuhin School, a smiling girl is seen walking to or from a music session, instrument case on her shoulder and sheet music in hand. Her casual dress signals that this is an everyday occurrence for a student at the school. In this pastoral setting, the student is figurately being embraced by crisp leaves and sunbeams that break through the treetops on this lush campus beside the Surrey Hills.

Although the Wells and the Yehudi Menuhin schools represent different settings, both make use of their cultural resources to semantically convey a privileged locale beyond ordinary buildings and lecture halls. They emphasise that their institutions do not replicate conventional schools; rather, specialist schools are unique environments for the specialist education of select students. In addition, online pictures of classical music performances in concert halls and cathedrals support the discourse of a specialist music programme that goes beyond the mundane image of secondary education.

By contrast, there are many examples of various mixed signals coming from the schools. While Chetham's School of Music does not seem to place any emphasis on its surroundings, it uses what is probably the most common way of depicting a specialist college: a multimodal composition of symbols that, on the one hand, convey a superior status, and, on the other, portray a non-special, relaxed everyday environment. Figure 3, from the homepage of the Purcell School for Young Musicians, represents such a typical composition of mixed messages. While the Beethoven sheet music on the piano behind the caption, 'A Programme of Music Excellence', reflects an elite code, other parts of the collage downplay the meaning of eliteness. The smiling, casually dressed girls and the cup of coffee or tea connote relaxation and the communal spirit of everyday school life.
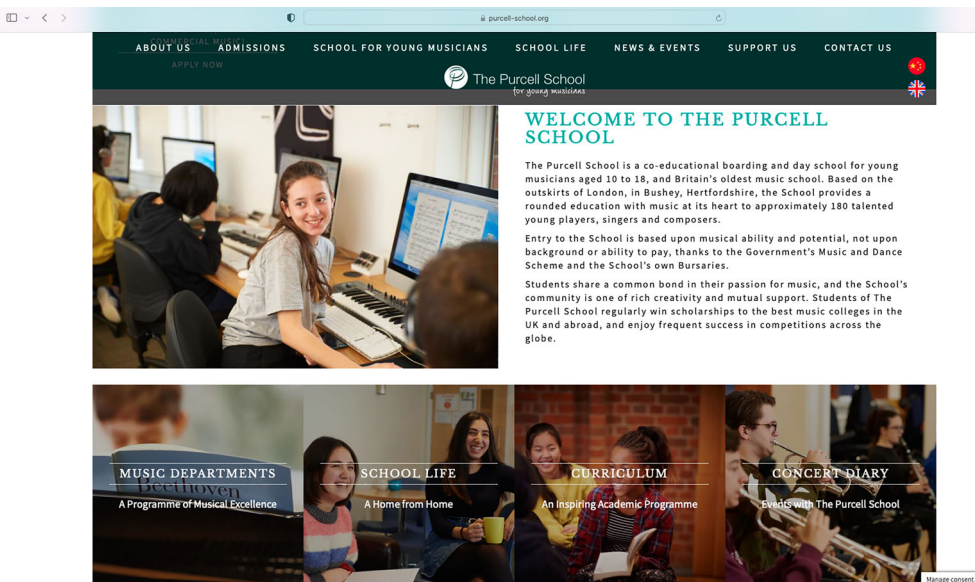

Figure 3. Screenshot of the homepage, the Purcell School, https://www.purcell-school.org.

Additionally, the student sitting in the computer room provides a balance between a traditionally run conservatory and a modern music school.

People

Specialist music schools proclaim that they are open to anyone with a strong interest in music. They commonly seek children and fledgling musicians with natural talent, rather than experienced, accomplished music students. While such a focus on aptitude is considered a way of counteracting the influence of a student's socio-economic background (see, for example, the text in Figure 3), a school's culturally and socially selective intake may be mistakenly thought to be the result of admitting the most talented applicants (Gaztambide-Fernández, Saifer, and Desai 2013). Since talent is believed to be inborn, not acquired, the prospective student that visits the website is asked to self-evaluate whether or not he or she is one of those fortunate talented ones (Maton 2014). How significant students (that is, those who are considered appropriate for the school) are depicted on the website most likely plays a role in the process of a candidate's self-selection.

Prospective students who visit the website of a specialist music school will likely come away with stereotypical views of the specialist student. The schools show themselves welcoming to those who demonstrate the skills and values of Western art music. This understanding is facilitated through the many pictures that visually represent the students' and their teachers' ways of playing and relating to the practice of performing music. While schools may accept any young instrumentalist, the website's visuals communicate the view that talented students mainly play musical instruments found in a symphony orchestra or in concert band. Thus, the schools' online presence conveys a stereotypical image of the 'significant' student as a young musician dedicated to Western classical music and its collective norms.

Depictions of significant students include certain desirable characteristics, such as self-confidence, autonomy, and charisma (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). The 'right gaze' is shown by displaying students who demonstrate focus through their aspiration, dedication, discipline, and responsiveness. In this regard, posture plays an important role. For example, a student's active upright posture connotes self-confidence and an energetic spirit. In the sitting position, students hold themselves somewhat rigidly in what would be considered stilted in an everyday context. While this may support ergonomics and breathing, it also models the posture of a disciplined individual. Thus, one sees students who are positioned in specific arts-appropriate genres, reflecting a strong expressive order (Bernstein 1975, 2000).

Schools have chosen to display cultural diversity and social background by showing ethnic variation on their websites. Since specialist schools actively seek applicants from abroad, visual representations that may connote 'foreign background' elevate the image of an international school.

While ethnic variation may be relatively well represented, suggestions of religious affiliations appear to be limited. Protestant and Catholic symbols are shown, but one seldom finds signs of non-Christian religions or cultures. A school may enrol students from all over the world, but visual representations associated with Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, or Hindus are rare. Moreover, everyone seems to be assimilated to Western aesthetics, such as regarding the choice of instruments and clothing depicted. The absence of 'others' signifies cultural discrimination, hence social exclusion (van Leeuwen 2008).

It has been difficult to find images representing physical disabilities or cross-border sexuality. Nor are noticeable differences in complexion and body types evident. Thus, despite ethnic variation and a reasonable gender balance, the music school websites depict a relatively homogeneous view of their students.

Practices

The specialist secondary music schools are rooted in the European conservatory musical tradition. Their approach to music education is positioned in contrast to what is considered popular music

and informal ways of learning (Bull 2019; Wright 2008). Web platforms commonly reflect such distinctions by depicting only what they consider the legitimate practice of making music. While a variety of genres and styles are displayed, there is a dominance of signs that connote Western art music. The viewer will most likely recognise the instruments shown and the social interactions as 'classical music'. There is some jazz indicated, including audio production and commercial pop and rock (the Purcell School), but otherwise attributes of popular music rarely appear. Digital instruments, amplifiers, lighting displays, and other types of technical apparatus that denote popular music are underrepresented or shown only in more informal situations. Thus, the normative aesthetics on the websites are suggestive of relatively strong boundaries between meaning of 'classical' and 'popular'.

The visual representation of musical practice is also about displaying what are considered desirable ways of acting, being, and playing. The viewer looks upon interactional relationships between the students themselves, and between the students and their teachers, masters, and conductors. The rules of the game are visually displayed in various ways, particularly in videos posted on social media. There one finds recordings of school concerts. These convey multimodally coded messages of a particular orientation to meaning and what is considered appropriate behaviour while performing.

Bodily expressions provide a visual dimension of the multimodal representation of Western art aesthetics (Bull 2019; Hall 2018). The clean sound of classical music, with its emphasis on melodic clarity and harmonic resonance, are visually accompanied by signs of ritualised event: restricted bodily movements, formal dress, patterns of controlled interaction on stage (entrance, bows, and exits), the detached relationship between musicians and audience, and contextualisation within roomy concert halls and cathedrals. The way of making music may be recognisable or unfamiliar, depending on the viewer's social and cultural background. In consequence, the online view of how students and their teachers interact during performances may be considered appealing and sophisticated, or alien to the viewer's own understanding of musical practices.

Discussion

The visual representations of the most privileged music secondary schools in England are instructive for understanding cultural and social reproduction. Such institutions may be socially exclusive, depending on their choice of semiotic resources. Our findings demonstrate a diversity in how specialist music secondary schools visually represent the meaning of specialisation. Nevertheless, there are strong ties to an elite code that associates advanced musical skills with certain principles of collective norms (Lamont and Maton 2008; Maton 2014). Because of this specialist orientation to the meaning of music education, these schools must present their distinct culture by clarifying *who* they are, *what* they offer, and to *whom* they cater. This is done by choosing communicative resources that signify exclusiveness and, simultaneously, distinguish themselves from what may be considered signs of a 'non-specialised' status.

The elite code of specialist music education implies a sacred orientation to meaning. While Western art music is not religious, the secularised meaning of 'the sacred' is found in its binary relation to 'the profane' (Bernstein 1975, 2000). Sacredness, as its name implies, refers to what has been considered set apart, a context-independent 'classical' meaning in contrast to an everyday, contemporary, mundane orientation to music education. This division implies a variety of boundary drawings, such as in the classification between highbrow versus lowbrow culture, or in the division between classical and popular music (Bourdieu 1984). Schools reflect and communicate such distinctions by choosing semiotic resources that reflect a particular set of aesthetic norms and values. They use canons and procedures that proclaim their detachment from the ways popular music is performed. Instead, the students and teachers depicted in the schools' promotional material mostly demonstrate their commitment to the timeless classical principles of Western art music. Their repertoire

announces their taste, accompanied by various non-musical semiotic resources that multimodally exhibit a formal, distanced, and sacralised orientation to music (Bull 2019).

The sacred meaning we have referred to is broader than that of musical development and artistic performance. While specialist schools are the gateway to the conservatories, a music track is also presented as an adequate pathway to university studies for those who do not pursue a musical career. For both these purposes, the semiotic resources used elevate these music schools above the mundane status of secondary education. The reasons for acquiring the skills of a fine arts performer and achieving classical norms is the cultivation of the individual towards higher values, rather than profane means and needs (Hall 2018; Saifer and Gaztambide-Fernández 2017). Thus, the meaning of specialisation has a humanistic value that goes beyond the art of music.

While there is legitimacy in the concept of specialisation and a place for highly selective schools, the current approach to social and cultural diversity may warrant scrutiny. The context-transcending elite code now prevailing appears to be strongly class-bound (Wright and Davies 2010). While the practices of specialist music schools are not solely class-determined, the displayed view of specialist education substantially represents middle-class characteristics and musical expressions associated with Western art music. This, in turn, means that cultural capital and the privilege of extensive musical training do matter and may be mistaken for biologically determined talent or aptitude (Gaztambide-Fernández, Saifer, and Desai 2013). Thus, the elite code contributes to the reproductive mechanism of organically reserving specialist arts education for those already initiated.

In addition to implicit and unintended class-based distinctions, there are also cultural and social boundaries that may undermine ethnic diversity. The narrow representation of musical skills and practices based on the aesthetics of Western art music-making and pedagogy emphasises the distinction of 'like us, or not like us' as schools tend to see diversity as a matter of assimilation to the principles of Western classical music, rather than aesthetic integration of various genres, styles, and cultural traditions (Bradley 2007; van Leeuwen 2008). This assimilation comprises instrumental and expressive ways of performing music (Bernstein 2000), including such semiotic codes as clothing and bodily movement (Bull 2019). Conventions like these can alienate those who have not acquired the code of Western art music. To appeal to a more culturally and socially diverse group of prospective students, schools must transform their subordinating concept of specialisation towards a broadening understanding based on principles of aesthetic integration.

In order to counter stereotypical patterns and begin to question norms, school can strive to avoid homogeneous images by including a broad mix of students and teachers in different settings. Strategies for overcoming pre-existing beliefs may also appropriate the technique of counter-stereotypic imaging, that is, turning to images and depictions that designedly clash with established patterns of representation. Such visuals may challenge gender cliches, amplify non-Western attributes, and display cross-cultural practices. However, well-intentioned attempts to cater to cultural diversity can easily slip into new stereotypes that represent preconceived notions of cultural-origin preferences and stable identities (Karlsen 2017; Sæther 2010). Moreover, counter-stereotypical images do not help if they are not representative of actual circumstances. In context of a strong focus on Western art aesthetics and principles of classical music, atypical images may be no more than maladaptive representations that are easy to propose. Thus, changes in how music schools outwardly communicate must reflect structural changes on the inside. That correlation would be crucial if one is to achieve cultural equality and social justice within the context of specialist music secondary education.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

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