"Music is my life": Examining the connections between music students' workload experiences in higher education and meaningful engagement in music

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Abstract
Enhancing our knowledge about students' experiences during their studies in higher music education is essential to understand and support them as they cope with their specific workloads in studying music. This study provides a research-based understanding of what *engaging in music* means to music students when they reflected on their experiences of their studies and workloads. The data were collected from interviews with 29 students in higher music education institutions in Finland and the United Kingdom, and the analysis was conducted by following the framework of transcendental phenomenology. Music students' experiences of their workload are connected in multifaceted ways to the meanings they ascribe to their engagement in music, such as intense and complex experiences that are also a source of vitality, their development as musicians, their creative self-expression, their interaction with others and in building a community, their personal growth and coping approaches during their studies, and the transcendental experiences they encounter during their engagement with music. Thus, the findings indicate that engaging in music is a holistic experience for music students. This study shows the importance of understanding and investing in music students' unique workload experiences through research on the teaching and learning practices of higher music education institutions, which can in turn support music students' well-being, learning, and future careers.

Keywords
engagement, higher education, meaning, music student, transcendental phenomenology, workload

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Students' workload, stress, and burnout are common research topics in the field of higher education, but differences may arise when comparing the study workload of general students in higher education with those who are specifically studying music (e.g., Bernhard, 2007). Music students face unique problems in their training, which differ from those of most other students in higher education and can be linked to their experienced workloads, such as music performance anxiety in exams, concerts, and competitions, and musculoskeletal problems arising from practicing and playing music (Jääskeläinen, López-Íñiguez, & Lehikoinen, 2022). In addition, music students may have a very strong relationship to the content of their studies, as many engage with the music profession for personal, emotional, social, and motivational reasons (e.g., Kokotsaki & Hallam, 2007; Park et al., 2007; Upitis et al., 2017). Thus, in the present study, the focus is particularly on describing *music students' experienced workload* and how music students connect these experiences to the different aspects and multiple *meanings of engaging in music*.

Meaningful engagement in music in connection to workload

When searching for ways to help music students deal with their workload, previous research has shown that the ways that they experience their engagement in music—their lived experience—are especially worth investigating. For example, Park et al. (2007) argue that music students' passion and love for music is a force that keeps them playing even through pain and the risk of injuries. Research by Kokotsaki and Hallam (2007) indicates that music students' engagement with music-making impacts their skills as musicians, social involvement, and personal development. Music students' intrinsic motivation plays a significant role in their lifelong engagement in music (Upitis et al., 2017). Their expectations and values can be important predictors of their career choices (Parkes & Jones, 2012).

In the present study, the term "engagement in music" was conceptualized by drawing from Bresler's (2005) list of the dimensions involved in understanding how musicians experience and analyze music, including learning to hear form, dynamics, timbre, melody, polyphony, and harmony in music (pp. 172–174). In addition, ways of being, doing, and becoming are essential dimensions of engagement in music, such as improvisation, empathy, embodiment, collaborative processes, and the connections between playing music, a musician's inner resources, and their interactions with the audience during a performance (pp. 174–179). While musicians' engagement with "the fluidity of sound and music" may sensitize them to "the fluidity of personal and cultural experience" (p. 170), it is interesting to examine, particularly in the context of higher music education, how the meaningful aspects of engaging in music connect to students' experiences of studying, as well as to their everyday lives.

Research suggests that music students experience positive learning environments as those that foster an inspirational learning community and support their individual development as students and musicians through their interests (Papageorgi et al., 2010). Such learning environments may encourage students to form connections between their experiences of coping with their studies and workload in higher education, and the meanings they ascribe to their engagement in music. Positive emotional experiences and a supportive learning environment can also lead to high-quality learning, engagement, and enjoyment for music students (Hallam

& Papageorgi, 2017). According to Perkins (2013), an in-depth look at the "learning cultures"[1] within higher music education institutions may facilitate a more supportive environment for students who experience music learning in different ways. When considering their students' workload, teachers have a role to play in designing meaningful learning (Odena, 2018) and allowing students to explore their creativities (Burnard, 2012) individually as well as communally with their peers (Lapidaki et al., 2012). Thus, the intersection of students' workload and their engagement with music is arguably an essential aspect of planning for developmental work in higher music education, especially regarding pedagogical practices and curricula.

Aim of the study and research questions

The aim of this study is to provide a research-based understanding of music students' experienced workload in higher education in relation to the meanings they ascribe to their engagement in music. This study utilizes the analytical procedure of transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) and focuses on one specific research question and three sub-questions:

Research Question: What does *engagement in music* mean to 29 music students in higher education in Finland and the United Kingdom, when they reflect on the experiences of their studies and workload?

    a) How do music students experience workload in their studies?
    b) How do music students experience engagement in music?
    c) How are music students' experiences of workload informed by their experiences of engagement in music?

Method

A transcendental phenomenological approach

In the present study, research plan, data collection, and data analysis procedure followed Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach, adapted to other scholars' processes (Creswell, 2007; Creswell et al., 2007; Dell et al., 2014; Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004).

Interviews and participants

Ethical approvals were granted by the research ethics committees (Uniarts Research Ethics Committee in Finland and Conservatoires UK Research Ethics Committee in the United Kingdom), and research permissions were obtained from the participating institutions prior to data collection. The data were collected from interviews on music students' experienced workload in higher education in Finland and the United Kingdom. The author conducted the semi-structured, in-depth interviews either through in-person meetings or remotely; the time

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[1] Perkins (2013) defines "learning cultures" in higher music education as the cultural practices through which students learn, including: (a) performing specialism, (b) social networking, (c) musical hierarchies, and (d) vocational position taking (p. 208).

span varied from 30 to 90 min. The interview questions were as follows: (a) Please tell me what it is like to be a student at the higher music education level; (b) How would you characterize your experience of being a student in terms of your workload in your studies? (c) How do you cope with the workload? (d) If you think about your own experiences of workload, is there anything stressful about being a student? (e) What is that stressful/workload experience like? (f) How do you cope with stress? Do you have any specific strategies? and (g) How has your participation in this research affected your experience in becoming more aware of and better able to cope with your workload? The interviews were audio-recorded (20 hr in total) and then transcribed verbatim (406 double-spaced pages in total). The demographic characteristics of the 29 interview participants are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the interview participants ($N = 29$).

Demographic characteristics	Item	Participants	Percentage
Country *	Finland	20	69
	United Kingdom	9	31
Gender	Female	21	72
	Male	8	28
Level **	Undergraduate	11	38
	Postgraduate	18	62
Group ***	Classical music	12	41
	Music education	8	28
	Other programmes	9	31

* An invitation to participate voluntarily in this research was sent via student email lists and newsletters in seven higher music education institutions in Finland and the United Kingdom. The institutions were chosen randomly. On the differences between higher music education systems in Finland and in the United Kingdom, see Jääskeläinen (2021).
** Undergraduate level includes bachelor's degree students, and postgraduate level includes both master's degree students and doctoral degree students.
*** Although the data about music students' experienced workload were collected through both questionnaires and interviews, the present study reports only on the interview data. When completing the questionnaire, students could express their willingness to be contacted for further research, and 29 students volunteered to participate in the interviews. In the questionnaires, there were respondents from study programs in *Classical music* (including different classical instruments, vocal music, and opera), *Music education*, and *Other programs* (including church music, composition, conducting, folk music, global music, music technology, popular music, and arts management). The interview data have been categorised into these three broad categories to protect students' anonymity.

Research phases and data analysis procedure

Figure 1 shows how the adapted transcendental phenomenological approach was applied across the six phases in the present study's research plan and data collection, and across the seven phases in the data analysis procedure.
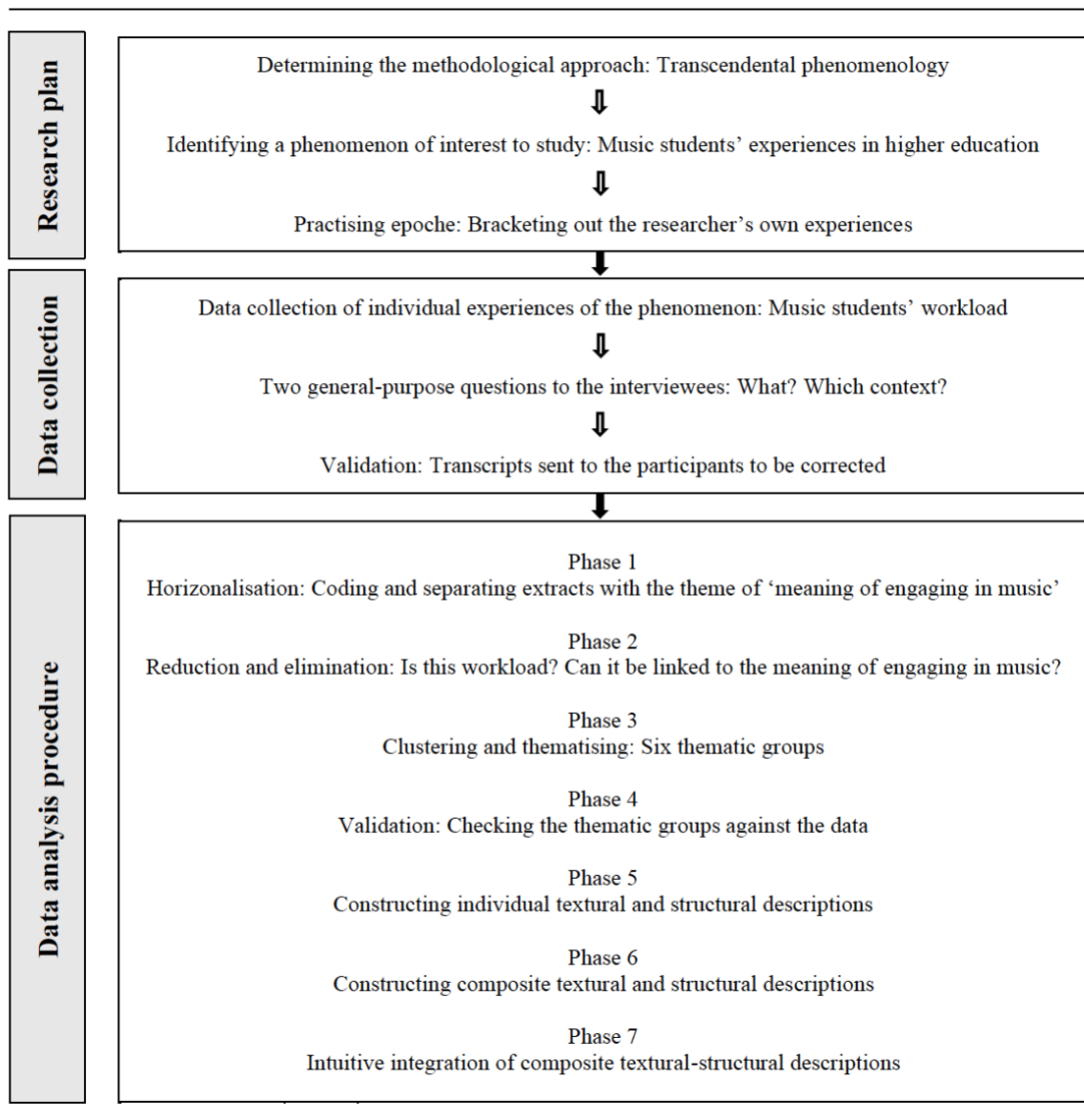
	Research plan	Determining the methodological approach: Transcendental phenomenology ⇓ Identifying a phenomenon of interest to study: Music students' experiences in higher education ⇓ Practising epoche: Bracketing out the researcher's own experiences
	Data collection	Data collection of individual experiences of the phenomenon: Music students' workload ⇓ Two general-purpose questions to the interviewees: What? Which context? ⇓ Validation: Transcripts sent to the participants to be corrected
	Data analysis procedure	Phase 1 Horizonalisation: Coding and separating extracts with the theme of 'meaning of engaging in music' Phase 2 Reduction and elimination: Is this workload? Can it be linked to the meaning of engaging in music? Phase 3 Clustering and thematising: Six thematic groups Phase 4 Validation: Checking the thematic groups against the data Phase 5 Constructing individual textural and structural descriptions Phase 6 Constructing composite textural and structural descriptions Phase 7 Intuitive integration of composite textural-structural descriptions

Figure 1. A procedural diagram depicting the present study's research design, which includes the adaptation of the methodology of transcendental phenomenology and the data analysis procedure followed. See Jääskeläinen (2022) for a full explanation of how Phases 1–7 of the data analysis procedure were carried out.

In Figure 1, the grey boxes on the left column illustrate each of the three research stages in the present study's research design (e.g., research plan, data collection, and data analysis procedure). The specific tasks involved in each research stage, and how they informed the later stages, are outlined and marked with arrows in the boxes on the right column. In particular, during the stage of the data analysis procedure, six thematic groups were formulated in Phases 3 and 4, based on the participants' experiences of their workload in relation to their constructed meanings of engaging in music. Then, following the construction of individual textural and structural descriptions for each theme in Phase 5, two composite structural descriptions of the 29 students' experiences of engaging in music were identified for each thematic group (composite textural descriptions) in Phase 6. Using the process of intuitive integration (Phase 7), the two **composite *structural* descriptions** for each theme were then synthesised together with the **composite *textural* descriptions** of the 29 students' workload experiences to create a **universal description** of the phenomenon presented in the findings below.

Findings

To respond to the research question about music students' experiences of workload in their studies, the six thematic groups that follow are presented individually, each highlighting how the music students' experiences of their workload are informed by their constructed meanings of engaging in music. The thematic groups were not necessarily evident in the same way across all 29 participants; however, they seemed to be connected together as various holistic experiences. The **composite** *structural* **descriptions** for each theme are presented in *italics* and are illustrated by interview quotations accompanied by the participant's identification number and country.

A synthesis of the six thematic groups

Intense and complex experiences

The music students in the study displayed very intense emotional reactions when they spoke about their experiences of engaging in music, compared with the many other topics that were discussed during the interviews. Students often wanted to ponder for a while before saying what music or musicianship meant to them, and even after that they often could not express its complex meaning properly with words alone: "I think that... I don't know how to put this" (uk28). The students' challenges in expressing themselves on this topic were communicated through different words, such as "difficult" (fi12), "tough" (uk12), "big" (uk23), "complicated" (fi18), and "hard" (uk24). Sometimes they were unable to find the right words at all, as this quotation shows:

> [Laughing] I should probably have thought of an answer to this over the week, but… Now this is difficult for sure. (fi10)

The students' intense reactions that were connected to the question of the meaning of music and musicianship were mostly positive and were expressed with joyful laughing and words such as "oh" (uk23), "ooh" (uk29), "oooooo" (fi02), "oh my god" (uk28), "well" (uk24), and "wow" (fi15): "It's… oh my goodness, there can be so much [laughing]" (uk29). Thus, their workload seemed to be connected to the students' source of vitality, as the question about the meaning of engaging in music was not only a concept for discussion but also touched the students' feelings, which were often accompanied by joyful laughing:

> This is such a big question that I have become emotionally moved [laughing]. This makes me sensitive [as a musician]. (fi07)

This quotation was connected to a discussion in which the music student realized that their work overload had contributed significantly to the decreasing amount of time available for nurturing their musical passion and enhancing their musicianship skills:

> Now when this spring has included a very heavy workload of studying and working, I have noticed that I have not had the energy to listen to music so much, and that has been an alarming sign to me that, all right, do I really want to do this if I lose the passion? (fi07)

These music students' reactions in the interviews, both in relation to the *inexpressible* nature of the meaning of music and its role as *a source of vitality*, indicated that their workload was deeply connected to their constructed meanings of engaging in music as an intense and complex experience.

Development as a musician

For these music students, their constructed meanings of engaging in music were inextricably tied to their own sense of development as *musicians*. Their workload, in this regard, was seen as consisting of a lifelong and everyday relationship with music, which was described by one of the students as follows: "music is like work and hobby and leisure time and friendship, and everything possible [laughing]" (fi14). The meaningful workload as a musician was in making music happen, which is described in the following quotation as "the point":

> The audience was transported and were enjoying listening to the music, and we, the choir and soloists, were making that happen. We were making art happen. Making art happen is the point, I think, of being a musician. (uk27)

However, while the workload was mostly felt as a positive experience of making art happen, there were also associated negative experiences:

> In a way, I feel that in this life I could do things in a much easier way than choosing music, or to be in the field of music, when choosing a profession. It is on many levels a terribly multifaceted and wonderful but very complex swamp. (fi17)

Aspects of practical *reality* can change how students understand their own musicianship. The following quotation was connected to a situation where the participant was longing for music-making as a hobby for the sake of pure enjoyment, because of the lighter workload compared with the professional level:

> I even envy those middle-aged people who start piano lessons or choir and can go there and just feel they are creating energy and joy for themselves. Compared to my position, if I tried to start a choir as a hobby then I would go there and feel that this is my profession, and all of my credibility as a professional musician depends on it. (fi17)

Thus, the music students' positive experiences of their workload (e.g., "making art happen" [uk27]) were crucial in their development as musicians, in terms of alleviating their sense of shock when, at some point, they realize that being a musician is not a magical thing. After all, music students' engagement in music was hard work that required continuous professional development, since after choosing to be a professional musician "you can no longer take the attitude that this is now a nice and relaxing hobby" (fi17).

Creative self-expression

When the music students described their workload in terms of musical engagement (as opposed to writing essays), their workload experiences were particularly associated with expressing creativity. For these students, however, achieving creative expression in their musical workload was often challenging. In particular, the significant academic workload (e.g., writing essays) negatively impacted the output quality of their musical workload (e.g., preparing for one-to-one lessons), thereby affecting their ability to create and deliver high-quality performances. For

example, in this situation a music student felt that the overly extensive requirements of their studies prevented them from connecting to their own meaningful values, their "own requirements", and their "own starting points" in making music:

> Yes, I would say that it is very important to me, the thing [music], but I have lately started to come to the conclusion that I would rather do it [music] according to my own requirements, and from my own starting points, and in that way independently, so then the value and sense are probably preserved. (fi20)

In addition, the meaning of engaging in music was not only about learning music—it was also about searching for and finding self-expression, connected to personal choices and values. Achieving creative expression in music-making also brought other *challenges* for the musician, where one's musicianship "depends somehow on how you challenge yourself" (fi17). Sometimes, engaging in music was even described as a negative experience that could hinder creativity. For example, the following student felt that having too tight a relationship with music caused stress, but at the same time could also offer a way to alleviate stress through multiple ways of expressing creativity:

> Sometimes music can be the cause of stress; sometimes you just need to go from classical music mode to like, I don't know, popular music, and just think that there's something other than this one cornerstone. (uk24)

Another participant described music as a meaningful and invaluable tool to express their creativity, which also helped in terms of coping with their workload:

> Yes, music means a lot to me. Profoundly, maybe; it is a kind of way to express myself. And then, in another way, to give words—or rather not to give words—to those thoughts and emotions, and to release, through playing, those thoughts that you cannot [express] in another way. For example, if you are feeling very overloaded, then you just go to play. And, well, then it, then within it, bit by bit, it starts to make things easier. (fi08)

Indeed, many students' answers, such as "So yeah, for me, it's a way to express myself" (uk29), featured the connection between the meaning of engaging in music and creative self-expression. For these students, achieving creative self-expression during musical engagement seemed to include the challenges of expanding their musicianship skills while managing their academic workload, as well as the rewards that are associated with music-making, such as reducing their stress levels. In particular, the ability to express their *emotions* through music appeared to help these students manage their workload. In addition, musical engagement in different contexts seemed to contribute to the tension of both hindering and enabling creative self-expression during music-making.

Interaction with others

A common and positive theme across the students' understanding of their engagement with music involved acquiring skills and opportunities to interact with others. Particularly after sharing music, students experienced their workload as a positive feeling, thus indicating that interaction with others was a rewarding part of engaging in music:

It [engagement in music] is a chance to create something that you can share with everybody. I like that creation aspect of it, and then getting to share it [music] with everybody. Afterwards there is a really nice feeling. (uk21)

In particular, the music students spoke about how their experienced *communication* with audience members played a role in facilitating unique musical experiences: "And then, maybe, I would also like to convey to other people something like a miracle, or something like that" (fi13). This sense of interaction involved the creation of a momentary musical world, where both the performers and listeners appeared to be transported into different realities. Furthermore, the opportunity to communicate with others was a source of positive workload because it was a key point in meaningful musical engagement. This is captured in the following quotation about a music student's performance experience:

Transporting people and giving them art. Allowing other people to be transported, and allowing other people to enjoy. What's the point of it, if it's not communication? (uk27)

However, the positive aspects (e.g., interaction with others through meaningful musical engagement) that these students experienced in their musical workload were not only associated with their audience. The students also extended these positive aspects of their musical workload to their potential impact on the wider community. For example, here a music student expresses a strong belief that music has a positive impact on society:

Basically, the creative arts in general help to develop us into better human beings, and they build us into a better society, and I think that, the fact that especially classical music is being cut in schools, or the accessibility to it—the opportunity to be exposed to classical music, the fact that it's being cut in schools is just … immoral. So yeah, I guess that's that, you know—making us better humans. (uk28)

Building a *community* with other musicians was important too, as one of the students reported: "Of course, in addition to this practical work, I have become a member of a new community" (fi06). Thus, the meaning of engaging in music was expressed by the music students as having an interaction with others and as an essential force in building communities within a society.

Personal growth and coping approaches

Music students described the meaning of engaging in music as an inseparable part of their personal growth. In particular, engaging in music resulted not only in a positive workload experience in terms of enhancing the students' *self-development* as musicians, but also in a positive effect on their life in general. One student, for example, described it as "lots of joyful things, and then learning new things and getting enthusiastic, and I like very much the feeling of movement in music, and something like that" (fi15). The meaning of engagement in music was an ongoing process that developed gradually alongside life experiences:

I am still too young to say what music means to me. It will probably become clearer over the next few decades. (fi20)

This music student had recently pondered the meaning of musicianship and realised that it was better to leave it as an open question for the future to answer.

Engaging in music also held a very personal meaning for the students, and it had even helped them to understand their own *personalities*:

> Yeah, music to me is everything. Yeah, I guess it [music] is my life. I wouldn't be who I am today without music. (uk24)

In addition to encouraging personal growth, music also served as a useful coping method that had a positive impact on their overall workload experience: "I also experience that somehow my self-knowledge and maybe also self-esteem have increased due to the fact that I can express myself with music" (fi04).

During their interviews, most of the participants mentioned that they could not imagine life without music. However, there were also some different opinions, particularly when the students had experienced too much stress and overload in their studies, and realised the importance of having support from other people:

> By the way, music does not mean everything to me. My family, or my partner and my parents [laughing], are important to me. And then my friends are important to me. And even doing everything else is important to me. (fi05)

This participant expressed their view with cynicism, which indicated that their intense relationship with music, while strong, did manifest ambivalent feelings. In comparison with other students' views, this illustrated the different roles that music occupies in people's lives and how participants' individual personalities were deeply intertwined with their constructed meanings of engaging in music.

Transcendental experiences

The transcendental experiences gained from engaging in music were meaningful to the music students and were also connected to a positive workload experience when music was considered as a restorative tool: "Yes, I have sincere faith in the fact that music is healing the world and, also for myself, it definitely is that kind of crucial and invaluable tool in this life" (fi08). The *healing* effects of music were connected to something profoundly positive that helped the students overcome the challenges they faced in acquiring and improving their musicianship skills, as well as in everyday life:

> I believe that [creating] music involves engaging in diverse tasks and possibilities that can influence both individual people and the whole world in a positive way. Above all, it means for me something good and something, I don't know, hope and something like, unambiguously good, even when I feel that I can't play my instrument and this is terrible, I move on to play my second instrument. And that kind of more holistic experience, which then also connects people, which consoles, and which cheers up and which offers ways to handle emotions and, you know, all these textbook answers about what music does. (fi14)

The participant above had also recently written about the meaning of music in a learning diary, which may have helped them to interpret their reflections as a holistic experience. The meaning of engaging in music was also described by another student as an *infinite* resource that was given to people as a divine gift to be used, worked at, and shared:

So, for me, the power of music is in that beauty or in that aesthetics. And in that kind of particular, so to say, divinity. Thus, I as a musician would like to convey that kind of other world, or the beauty that comes from some other world. So, especially that kind of divinity fascinates me. Or that kind of miracle, in a way. I think that the most interesting music is something that I don't understand and that I can't perceive. (fi13)

Meaningful engagement in music was seen as having an enjoyable connection with music, and that connection brought along with it a positive workload experience for music students, such as feeling healed and taking in positive energies: "Somehow it means definitely that kind of, if it can be crystallised, that in a way all that is kind of good and free and light, without those pressures for accomplishment and that kind of thing" (fi10). This sense of a positive energy, which was referred to by one participant as a "spirit" (uk26), was associated with belonging to everyone, and this notion also gave the music students the ability to understand the wider impact of engaging in music within society:

I think what makes it [music] so ingrained in society is the spirit that it conveys. It makes people feel different emotions and it conveys different identities. (uk26)

Thus, these music students viewed their transcendental experiences as a meaningful part of their engagements with musical activities. In addition, they associated these transcendental experiences as a positive workload experience, where they encountered a mixture of different feelings including a sense of healing, the ability to tap into a divine gift, and being able to draw from an infinite inner resource.

To summarize these findings in relation to music students' engagement in music informing their experienced workload, these six themes have shown that music students' experiences of workload, when they are understood in tandem with their constructed meanings of engaging in music, were highly complex, nuanced, and multifaceted phenomena. Therefore, the relationship between these students' constructions of engaging in music and their workload experiences could be better understood as a holistic experience than through singular meanings, as discussed below.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to provide a research-based understanding of music students' experienced workload in higher education in relation to the meanings they ascribe to their engagement in music. The findings have shown that these 29 music students' workloads can be characterized as comprising six different types of experiences, and that these experiences are informed by the students' constructed meanings of engaging in music in the following ways:

1) Intense and complex experiences: Sometimes *inexpressible* and complex emotions and thoughts were associated with the music students' experiences of engaging in music. These music students felt that their deep and intense emotional relationships with music were a *source of vitality* for them. Vitality is experienced as an increasing positive energy (Miksza et al., 2019); for example, participants' responses were often joyful and accompanied with laughter when they spoke about their engagement in music. Similarly, Upitis et al. (2017) found in their research that music students have a strong engagement with learning music and a deep emotional connection with playing music. This deep connection was seen in the present study

when the participants became "emotionally moved" while thinking about the meaning of their engagement in music. Thus, nurturing music students' intense personal connections to music can help them find deep experiences in their musicianship (Upitis, 2012).

2) Development as a musician: For these students, while the concept of "engaging in music" was understood as an everyday and lifelong developmental process, it also held a specific and different meaning when music was experienced as a profession instead of "a nice and relaxing hobby." These views were different from that of an amateur musician's perspective. Interestingly, Bonde et al. (2018) reported similar differences between amateur musicians' experiences of music as a relaxing leisure activity that helps to increase a sense of well-being and professional musicians' experiences of music training as a highly demanding activity that may even cause health issues (p. 277). Indeed, the pressure on the development of professional *musicians* is only increasing, as the growing cultural diversity and technological development in music education have expanded current conceptions of musicianship (Webb & Seddon, 2012). In the present study, developmental and professional engagements also appeared to heighten the students' sense of responsibility toward their workload. For example, students acknowledged the practical *reality* of studying music professionally, viewing their musical workload as a perpetually challenging and long-term commitment. This was described by a participant: "I could do things in a much easier way than choosing music." These views also appeared to help the students to positively embrace their workload-related challenges as "a terribly multifaceted and wonderful but very complex swamp." Similarly, Park et al. (2007) found that although music students face many challenges related to their specific workloads, the ability to cultivate a passionate and positive relationship with music often allows them to successfully continue their music-making.

3) Creative self-expression: Creating music was experienced as a personal *challenge* by music students. For example, one participant described their musical workload experience as achieving creative self-expression through "how you challenge yourself". Furthermore, *emotions* expressed through music helped the students to cope with their personal feelings, because music is regarded as "a way to express myself". Similarly, findings by Hallam and Papageorgi (2017) show that self-expression and emotions are intertwined with one's musical identity. In the present study, music students did not identify possible solutions for how they could overcome their personal challenges in the context of achieving creative self-expression. Moreover, it appeared that many participants had tried to cope with their challenges alone, to the point where they needed to distance themselves from their music studies to "independently" find their creativity. This raises the question of how music students' creativity and self-expression could be better nurtured through collaborative support throughout their music studies, as the learning cultures of many current music institutions often encompass many competitive and high-pressure elements (Perkins et al., 2017). For example, Burnard (2012) argues that within the creative practices in music education, there is a need to "promote the power of relationships over individual minds, multiple worlds over singular realities, collaborative interdependence over individual heroism, and dialogue over alienation" (p. 333).

4) Interaction with others: The music students in the present study regarded *communication* with other people as a salient characteristic of their musical experiences, where people have an opportunity to be transported into different realities by engaging in music. As one participant pointed out, "What's the point of [music], if it's not communication?" In addition, the potential to build a *community* with other musicians, as well as a better society, was regarded by the students as an essential driving force in their constructions of what it means to engage in music. Similarly, Lapidaki et al. (2012) also emphasized the importance of the communal,

participatory component as part of creative practices in university music education. Indeed, collaborative musical practices such as bands, ensembles, orchestras, and other participatory musical activities have clear benefits for the music students themselves, not only in their music studies, but also in their personal and social lives (Kokotsaki & Hallam, 2007). On the other hand, it is also important to consider the negative impacts of collaborative groups in the context of higher music education. For instance, Park et al. (2007) found that ensemble-based commitments may cause additional stress for music students, which in turn can negatively influence their workload experiences.

5) Personal growth and coping approaches: Similar to how different individuals can exhibit distinct personality traits, the music students in the present study were found to have unique relationships with their music. Findings by Park et al. (2007) also indicate that engaging in music provides a way for music students to define themselves. The notion of music students' self-growth and how they cope with challenges as autonomous individuals has also been highlighted in music education research (Creech & Gaunt, 2012). Although the master-apprentice model has been central to one-to-one tuition structure in Western music education, to better support music students' self-development there is a need for music institutions to focus more on "student reflection, autonomy, and motivated, self-directed learning" (p. 703). In particular, music students may need specific support throughout their studies to help them reflect critically on their own *self-development* and their individual *personalities* (e.g., acknowledging what they can and cannot handle) to progress constructively as future professional musicians. This kind of support would benefit, for example, students who are unsure about their musical progress and feel that "[they are] still too young to say what music means to [them]". Therefore, it is worthwhile for music educators and program administrators to understand the various tensions and complexities that are driving students' experiences, including why they might prefer not to think about what music and musicianship means to them. For instance, if a student feels that they are too young to reflect deeply about their musical engagement experiences, then this attitude might indicate a particular belief that may, in turn, have implications for the student's future self-development and personal growth during their music studies (López-Íñiguez & Burnard, 2022).

6) Transcendental experiences: The findings of the present study revealed that the music students often encountered deep transcendental experiences during their musical engagement. The students associated their transcendental musical experiences with feelings of positive energies, a sense of *healing*, and the ability to tap into divine and *infinite* inner resources. Moreover, the students' transcendental experiences contributed to the positive experiences in their musical workload, with one participant recalling feeling "all that is kind of good and free and light, without those pressures for accomplishment" during their musical practice. Indeed, Lindström et al. (2003) have found that other music students experience similarly deep levels of musical engagement, which indicates that such mysterious, nonverbal, bodily, and emotional forms of communication can occupy a significant and meaningful part of musicians' novel interpretations and self-expressions during performance. In the present study, the music students' transcendental experiences also provided them with insights into understanding how their own engagement in music might have a positive impact on the wider society.

When considering how these music students' workload experiences are informed by their experiences of engaging in music, it is important to note that, taken together, these six themes indicate various holistic experiences of the students' musical studies. Other scholars in higher music education have argued that it is important to acknowledge this holistic nature in experiences of engaging in music—particularly in connection to students' workload—to better

support music students' abilities to maintain a well-balanced life during their music studies (Reimer, 2010), as well as beyond their training (Liertz & Macedon, 2007). Adopting this holistic perspective may encourage teachers to view their music students as complex, bodily, living subjects who are constantly learning and interacting with the world. In doing so, students may gain more meaningful learning experiences (Thorgersen, 2010), which may also lead to more successful outcomes compared with more traditional music teaching and learning approaches (Crawford, 2014).

To grasp the essence of a phenomenon from individual experiences during the research process, Polkinghorne (1989) states that a researcher's aim should be to "understand better what it is like for someone to experience that" (p. 46). Furthermore, Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) point out that during the process of interpretation, space should be given to allow for ambivalent or unexpected findings to emerge from the data analysis. In the present study, it was found that while the interview data consistently showed strong associations between the 29 music students' constructed meanings of engaging in music and their positive workload experiences, some of the data also revealed opposing findings. In particular, the fifth theme, personal growth and coping approaches, presented some contradicting views between students. Although most of the students mentioned their engagement in music as an indispensable part of their lives, some who had faced extremely heavy workloads and felt burnt out during their studies offered a more balanced view, where music was less of a priority and occupied only one part of their lives.

Presenting such contradictory findings are important; in this case, the findings in the fifth theme show how work overload can have a negative impact on students' musical engagement experiences. Furthermore, it is worthwhile to consider whether experiences of work overload during a student's musical studies might later affect their career as professional musicians. Indeed, these kinds of ambivalent voices, expressed by some of the students in the present study, are necessary to bring a more practical and balanced awareness to many students' idealistic constructions of what it means to be a musician. In addition, these ambivalent viewpoints may also offer an opportunity for mentors to help their students develop a critical awareness of the implications of different musical teaching and learning traditions, as well as some of the unequal institutional cultures that still exist in the field of higher music education (Jääskeläinen, 2021). For example, hierarchical, competitive, and exclusive practices have long historical roots in the field, especially in classical music, and students often reproduce them after internalizing the social and hierarchical values connected to elitist constructions of classical musicianship (Bull, 2019).

To bring together the multiple viewpoints that have been presented throughout the "Discussion" section, Figure 2 presents a synthesis of the six thematic groups, where the 29 music students' workload experiences and their constructed meanings of engaging in music are represented together as holistic experiences.
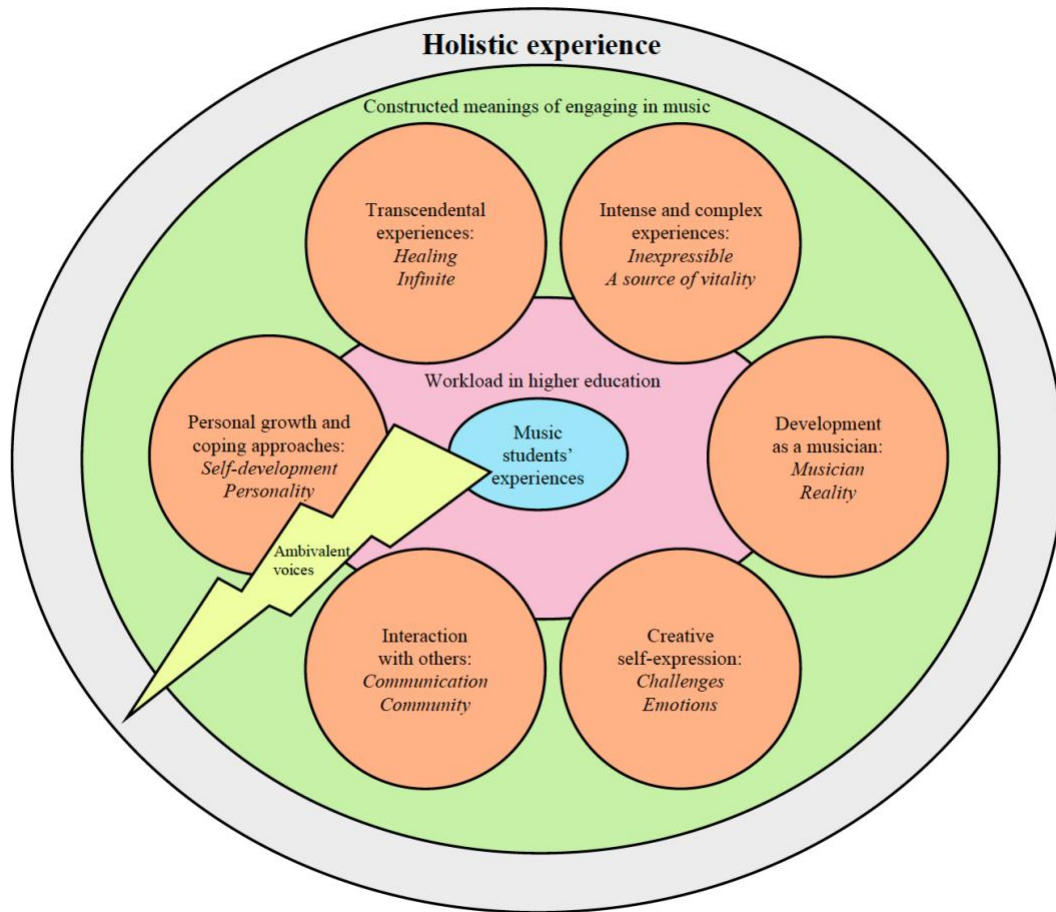
Figure 2. A synthesis of 29 music students' experiences of their workload in higher education, and how these experiences connect to the students' constructed meanings of engaging in music as a holistic experience.

In Figure 2, the six thematic groups are positioned between the students' constructed meanings of engaging in music and their workload experiences to illustrate the connections between these two experiences as part of their various holistic experiences. Furthermore, each thematic group can be characterized by the pair of (*italicized*) composite structural descriptions that were identified within each theme. In addition, the several students who expressed ambivalent views have been included next to their constructions of personal growth and coping approaches to highlight how listening to different views can provide important knowledge on how to better nurture students' engagement in music throughout their studies in higher music education.

Limitations

The present study has some limitations. The quotations used in this study were selected from a larger data set, which in turn comprised a small part of the interview data that included discussions with the participants on various topics beyond their musical engagement and workload experiences. Using a larger dataset that focused solely on the students' constructed meanings of engaging in music may have produced a more detailed examination of their experiences. In this regard, future research might consider collecting more focused and relevant data to fully explore the relationships between music students' personalities and their experiences of 'musicianship'; to follow their individual developments as musicians; and to better understand music students' experiences of "community" in the context of their studies in higher music education. Finally, the essences of these 29 music students' experiences, as

captured in the present study, can only reflect a particular time, context, and a specific group of participants, and therefore the findings should not be generalized.

Implications

Much of the existing research in this area emphasizes the negative consequences of a difficult or unmanageable workload for music students. These consequences include overload, stress, burnout (Jääskeläinen et al, 2020; Jääskeläinen & López-Íñiguez, 2022; Jääskeläinen, López-Íñiguez, & Lehikoinen, 2022; Jääskeläinen, López-Íñiguez, & Phillips, 2022), and mental illness (Koops & Kuebel, 2019). Examining the workload experiences of music students may provide valuable insights into their meaningful musical engagement. In particular, it is important to understand and support music students in terms of helping them to cope with different and specific types of workloads in higher music education, where their responsibilities include demonstrating their musical progress and managing their coursework (Bernhard, 2007). Furthermore, Hallam and Papageorgi (2017) suggest that we should nurture music students' love and enjoyment of music alongside their studies in higher education. Indeed, this may help music students to focus on the most meaningful aspects of their musical learning experiences (Reid, 2001). Accordingly, teachers' continuous professional development is important so that music students feel that their pedagogical approaches are up to date (Creech & Gaunt, 2012) and that their tuition is responding to their specific needs and expanding conceptions of musicianship (Webb & Seddon, 2012).

Conclusion

The present study has shown how music students' workload experiences in higher education are connected to their constructed meanings of engaging in music. These connections can be understood as students' various holistic workload experiences that comprise the following constructed meanings of musical engagement: (a) intense and complex experiences, (b) development as musicians, (c) creative self-expression, (d) interactions with others, (e) personal growth and coping approaches, and (f) transcendental musical experiences. Students' emotional reactions as they spoke about engaging in music have shown that music is a source of vitality to them, and that engaging in music is a complex phenomenon that many found difficult to describe. Therefore, understanding music students' lived experiences of studying music may contribute to improving the learning and teaching environments of institutions so that they can better foster an inspirational learning community. It may also better support music students' well-being, learning, and future careers by encouraging their individual development as students and musicians through engaging their interests. More research is needed to increase our understanding of the various ways that music students cope with their studies, which have unique characteristics compared to other fields in higher education.

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