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Artist entrepreneurship – a necessity or a privilege?

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This paper attempts to present some views on the concept of entrepreneurship in the context of professional musicians' life and work. Entrepreneurship has been increasingly regarded as an important aspect of music professions, even though it has not been universally welcomed. It has been mostly seen as a necessity resulting from the difficulties on a labour market. However, it can be argued that an entrepreneurial approach might be an effective formula for those artists who appreciate independent and innovative ways of creating value, both economic and cultural. The paper is focused on defining possible areas of musician's entrepreneurship and exploring ways it is present in initial and continuing education programmes. It concludes with some suggestions for potential changes in music tertiary education and professional development opportunities.

Keywords: music entrepreneurship, artist professional development, skills.

Przedsiębiorczość artysty – przywilej czy konieczność?

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Artykuł prezentuje wybrane poglądy na rolę przedsiębiorczości w kontekście aktywności zawodowej muzyków. Choć uważana coraz częściej za niezbędny aspekt uprawiania zawodów muzycznych, przedsiębiorczość postrzegana jest ciągle raczej jako konieczność wynikająca z konieczności adaptowania się do wymagań rynku pracy. Można jednak twierdzić, że postawa przedsiębiorcza pomaga i daje możliwości tym artystom, którzy próbują tworzyć nową wartość zarówno w sensie ekonomicznym, jak i kulturowym. W tekście zarysowane zostały obszary, których dotyczyć może przedsiębiorczość artysty muzyka oraz przedstawione sposoby uczenia się przedsiębiorczości w ramach programów studiów artystycznych. Konkluzje artykułu obejmują m.in. sugestie dotyczące możliwych zmian w uczelniach artystycznych oraz programach rozwoju zawodowego artystów.

Słowa kluczowe: przedsiębiorczość artysty, muzyk zawodowy, rozwój zawodowy, umiejętności.

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1. Introduction

„Our mission doesn't change—we educate and nurture exceptionally gifted musicians to perform at the highest levels of accomplishment. But today, performance excellence is the starting point. Musicians must be more than virtuosos; they must be their own businesses.”

This quote was taken from the website of one of the best music schools in the United States – New England Conservatory (NEC), where a new unit, called Entrepreneurial Musicianship was established in 2010. This fairly recent addition to NEC structure reflects the wider trend in higher music education – not only in the USA, but also in Europe – and results from a range of factors which we discuss briefly in this paper. After recollecting some views on the place of entrepreneurship in the arts, the paper will attempt to define possible modes of understanding the role of an entrepreneurial approach in the professional life of musicians. Then they will be complemented with comments of professional musicians. In conclusion the paper will suggest possible developments in a higher education policy and practice.

2. Entrepreneurship and the arts

Entrepreneurship in culture and more specifically in the arts is by no means a new phenomenon. When in the 18th century Richard Cantillon defined entrepreneur as a risk-taker (Varbanova, 2013), it has already been well proven in musical circles of London and Paris that concert activities had been successfully crossing the borders of court and church structures, and musicians had been taking responsibility for their presence on the market. During his time in Leipzig, after employment duties, Johann Sebastian Bach played in a café. On the evenings when he played, customers had to pay for the admission to this café. The proceeds were then shared with the composer. As Norman Lebrecht put it – „Bach sensed the commercial potential of music and helped establish a market” (Lebrecht, 1997, p. 29). George Friedrich Haendel set even a more powerful example – not only did he compose music and direct his operas, he also organised ensembles, hired musicians and singers. But all these organisational skills would not have defined Haendel as the entrepreneur. What really proved his entrepreneurial trait was his ability to find a new niche for his music when his operas seemed to lose audience. He realised that there was a potential public among both Christian and Jewish middle-class music lovers, and started composing oratorios based on Old Testament texts (Lebrecht, 1997, p. 30). History of music provides many more cases of musicians demonstrating entrepreneurial qualities, not only through starting businesses, such as publishing companies, instrument factories, etc., but also through shaping their professional careers in a way previously unheard of, Paganini and Liszt being the most remarkable examples in the 18th and 19th century.

It has been attributed to the 19th century concept of artist in society that the „conflict” between the arts and management appeared and led to stereotypical judgement of artists being unable to understand the logic of management and organisation. Another stereotype presents artists as unwilling to deal with any aspect of a professional life apart from the artistic creation or performance. It is however worth noting that comprehension points between the two apparently separated spheres have included the striving to progress and – most notably – the figure of entrepreneur/innovator who takes risk in order to produce value through his/her activity (Chiapello, 1998, p. 63–64). As Bilton and Cummings remind, the word “entrepreneur” – according to the Complete Oxford Dictionary – was first used to describe a manager of a musical institution: „one who ‘gets up’ entertainments, esp. musical performances” (Bilton and Cummings, 2010, p. 107). But it is not only the historical notion that links entrepreneurs and artists, especially musicians. There are several traits that are regularly recognised as common for the two types of activity. Describing the cycle of „strategic entrepreneurship” Bilton and Cummings delineate two paradoxical zones: zone of dilettante and zone of diligence, and explain that experiment and risk, openness to new ideas, and playfulness make the zone of dilettante with aspects of recognition and development of ideas. The zone of diligence is built on experience and expertise, knowledge of the field, hard work, craft, application, and covers aspects of elaboration and launch of the new product. The entrepreneurial process moves between the two zones, linking risk and experimentation with focus and technique (evaluation being the intermediary phase) and „it is the transition from dilettante to diligent which converts innovative ideas into entrepreneurial application” (Bilton and Cummings, 2010, p. 121). Such approach is close to the concept proposed by Joseph Schumpeter who underlined the significance of innovation and dealing with uncertainty as main factors in the entrepreneurial process.

It has been accepted that entrepreneurship is not limited to the economic sphere and at least three other types of entrepreneurship have been discussed in the subject literature: political, social and intellectual (Kostera and Śliwa, 2010, p. 238–240) and in all of them innovation plays the key role in achieving organisational goals.

As to the cultural – or arts – entrepreneurship the definition has never been easy to set up. Giep Hagoort, focusing on cultural organisations outlined a triangle of factors that make core elements of cultural entrepreneurship, and proposed that it links cultural mission, passion and affection with societal responsibilities, while being external oriented and innovation driven. He also stressed that it can be realised in the middle management and project level, as intrapreneurship (Hagoort, 2000, p. 213–215). Ruth Rentschler presented conceptual view of entrepreneurship as „a process of creating value for the community that brings together unique combinations

of public and private resources to enhance social and cultural opportunities in an environment of change while remaining true to the creative mission of the organisation” (Rentschler, 2003, p. 164).

Lidia Varbanova described arts entrepreneurship as a visionary and innovative activity, both economic and sociocultural, developed on the basis of „innovation, exploitation of opportunities and risk-taking behaviour” (Varbanova, 2013, p. 17). She presents a very wide array of arts entrepreneur’s traits and competences, creating a multilayered portrait of an entrepreneurial arts manager. The list of competences is rather long, encompassing all possible aspects that one could wish – starting from typical management competences (planning, allocating resources, etc.), through strategic thinking and analytical skills, to understanding and applying digital dimensions of cultural organisations and projects. But next to such entrepreneurial competences as the ability to tolerate and manage risk, seeing problems as opportunities and focusing on solutions, or adapting to changes and being flexible, Varbanova also mentions the ability of social leadership and understanding cultural contexts, reminding that arts can be a tool for a social change and that artists increasingly work in a multicultural environment.

It is often underlined that creativity, being the specific trait of entrepreneurship, is the strongest factor associating it with the arts. Curiosity, self-confidence, vision, intrinsic motivation, seeing entrepreneurial activity as *modus vivendi*, and not only *modus operandi* for a specific project (Fillis and Rentschler, 2010) – that makes entrepreneurship so close to artistic creativity, music being probably the easiest field to find justification of countless comparisons between the two spheres.

3. Musician as entrepreneur

Craig M. Cortello, whose research on managers who received music education attempts to explain the role of music in the development of business people, enumerates several parallels which can be drawn between musicianship and business activity, pointing out their usefulness for entrepreneurial attitude (Cortello, 2009). As one of the most common benefits of music education he mentions gaining confidence and self-esteem, mostly thanks to many public presentations that musicians are expected to give since the beginnings of their music training. Another ability which seems particularly beneficial for business endeavours that require collaboration, is the ability to play in a band which translates into skillful teamwork. Improvising, as well as willingness to accept risk while „jamming” (i.e. improvising with other musicians, most often in jazz or blues ensembles), are also seen as traits of creativity necessary for entrepreneurial approach (Cortello, 2009, p. 33–36). One more parallel out of Cortello’s list is worth noting – discipline and fundamentals, that is: „learning the scales of your profession”

(Cortello, 2009, p. 35). Persistence, patience and resilience seem to be key qualities both for a successful musician and entrepreneur.

But it is not only the proximity of traits that should persuade us to see the two types of activity as parallel. Research on links between creativity and entrepreneurship confirms that entrepreneurial approach is especially attractive as a career model for people who see creativity as an important value (Fritsch and Sorgner, 2013). Therefore it seems quite appropriate that for performing artists turning to creative shaping their own career might be the right step. Such approach has also been forced by changes in artists' labour market over several decades. Increasingly it is the portfolio career that musicians hold nowadays. The shift is well illustrated by data from one of the leading conservatories in Europe – the Royal College of Music (RCM). In 1979 71% of alumni of RCM were holding a single job, whereas in 1995 only 28% were employed in one place and 72% were having multiple employment (Bennet, 2008, p. 45). Dawn Bennet points out that careers in music have become rather short-lived and characterised by a range of factors that lead to attrition, including: irregular salary, sporadic work, unsociable hours and managing multiple jobs (Bennet, 2008, p. 45). Some musicians search for employment outside the music sector rather soon after graduation. Others make use of their entrepreneurial nature (and skills) to create conditions that will allow them to develop and present their talent in the best possible way.

Such changes in the mode of employment of professional musicians reflect also the revision of understanding the role of musicians in contemporary society. There is a body of European research, most notably by Rineke Smilde (Royal Conservatoire in The Hague) and Magdalena Bork (Universität für Musik und Darstellende Kunst in Vienna) explaining how professional musicians see their artistic and professional identity nowadays. Rineke Smilde reminds that in changing cultural landscapes the music profession with stable, full-time jobs belongs to the past and that musicians' roles are placed in social contexts much wider than traditional music venues or recording studios (Smilde, 2009, p. 21–24). No longer just composers or instrumentalists, contemporary musicians become leaders of community groups and projects, teachers in out-of-school settings or independent producers. Referring to British research, Smilde underlines: „Rarely employed in one job for life, the musician is increasingly an entrepreneur having a portfolio career, comprising simultaneous or successive, brief and/or part-time periods of employment in different areas of music profession” (Smilde, 2009, p. 22). This requires a much wider range of competences than music education institution traditionally provide. Even if we consider the list of competences of cultural entrepreneurs drawn by Varbanova (Varbanova, 2013, p. 17–18) as too extended for the needs of an entrepreneurial musician, still there is much to be desired in terms of skills that graduates of music universities have when entering the labor market. In

a recent research carried out in Austria (Bork, 2010), the key competences defined by a prestigious music university graduates were grouped into several categories: technical – related to performing proficiency, artistic – linked to interpretation of a musical work, social competences – the ability to communicate with various professional partners (individuals, organisations, administration, etc.), entrepreneurial competences, health issues knowledge, and pedagogical know-how. The research also proved that one of the crucial issues in career buildout is the ability to deal with crisis, which may appear at very different stages of professional development. Needless to say, graduates felt that their university has not prepared them to face this challenge. They also stressed that they were not ready to get immersed in reality that proved radically contrasting to the traditional understanding of the musicians role, and the necessity for a contemporary musician to be entrepreneurial and to shape their career in a proactive way has been absolutely ignored in the entire process of their education (Bork, 2010, p. 317–341). Very similar comments were provided by Polish graduates in the *Report on artistic education* prepared for the Congress of Polish Culture (2009), stating that the school has not prepared them to use their knowledge and skills in practice, e.g. they have not learned how to organise the work of a choir, how to estimate a fee for their work, how to draw up a contract. When considering this type of remarks, pointing out to some deficiencies in the study programmes, as seen by graduates, it is very important not to focus solely on organisational skills as equivalent to entrepreneurial skills. In the higher music education institutions all over the world the need of providing the students with some kind of “additional” set of skills helping them in their future which is seen as increasingly challenging, has been recognised. However, most educational institutions try to satisfy this need in a rather un-creative way – through adding courses on business skills to the existing curricula of artistic studies.

It seems that not only conservatories, but also the musicians too often perceive entrepreneurship just as a set of – again – “additional” organisational or even administrative skills. In a pilot research conducted by the author of this article 2 years ago, graduates of an academy of music have been asked about their views on entrepreneurship. 7 musicians who took part in the survey had between 6 and 20 years of professional experience and had been selected on the basis of their proactive approach to shaping their careers. Their responses concerning the understanding of the term “entrepreneurship” mostly defined it as:

- *all organisational activities that lead you to the development of your professional work*
- *all activities – other than playing – which lead you to earning money*
- *ability to organise your professional life in order to earn money,*

and in this way clearly separated “entrepreneurship” from the artistic part of their work. It may be partly attributed to the fact that in Polish the term

is very strongly linked with a notion of setting up and running a business, therefore an association with any other sphere of life is limited to the economic dimension. Respondents did not see in the term the “disruptive force”, for which one needs to be creative but rather a set of administrative, mundane tasks. A slightly different picture appeared when respondents were asked to describe entrepreneurial musicians. Here are some of their views:

- *[Entrepreneurial musician] must have ideas and search for opportunities all the time.*
- *Entrepreneurial musicians cannot be afraid of taking risks and of being judged by others.*
- *Brave and not afraid of challenges and ideas that might seem strange.*

And the fullest response in the survey: *Entrepreneurial musician is willing to monitor the market, cannot be detached from everyday reality, must know the demand. They know how to find a niche that can be filled, know what people need and are aware that they can offer this to them and get professional satisfaction. Then they have to be able to work on that idea: plan, get funding, organise. They must have organisational skills and ability to provide a down-to-earth assessment. They have to be able to resign from a project and not stick to something only because it might bring some financial gains. They have to be flexible and not afraid when getting a proposal to do something that they have never done before, create a new professional profile which they have not envisioned before, to have courage to act and take risks.*

In line with this opinion we got a rather comprehensive portrait of an accomplished musician-entrepreneur, and it correlates strongly with views offered by theorists and practitioners of music entrepreneurship, research and education.

The views on qualities of entrepreneurial musicians provided by participants of this small survey show that these are not only the organisational skills that matter, but indeed the risk-taking, bold, sometime disruptive approach to the existing conditions that will enable creating a new place/project/idea to be developed and implemented.

This pilot research was aimed at a rather general exploration of the approach of classically trained musicians towards the concept of entrepreneurship. It has shown not only that there is a challenge in promoting entrepreneurial attitude among artists due to economic connotations of the term itself, which is regarded by many as not belonging to the artistic domain. When asked about a possibility of acquiring entrepreneurial skills, most respondents indicated that it is possible to learn to be entrepreneurial and that the period of their academic studies seem to be the best moment to get such training.

This is getting us closer to the problem of teaching entrepreneurship, especially in arts schools that traditionally focus on the artistic excellence, neglecting other dimensions of professional artist life. Gary Beckman expressed the dilemma of teaching entrepreneurship in arts schools in the following

way: „Do we wish them to 'start a business' or become agents of audience development, arts leaders, arts practitioners, or simply emotionally fulfilled individuals who 'do' art as their livelihood?” (Beckman, 2011, p. 29).

4. Teaching artists to be entrepreneurial

Creativity, so intrinsically linked with artistic activity has been long recognised as a key component of entrepreneurial behaviour. Therefore it is only too easy to believe that an artist should be entrepreneurial by definition. It is obviously not true, as well as not true is another well-rooted stereotype – showing artists as helpless, over-sensitive individuals who are not able to cope with practical everyday reality, not to mention starting and running a new business. Visionary yes but unable to implement their brilliant ideas. Is it then possible to develop those qualities that will lead to the entrepreneurial behaviour, including initiating, setting in motion and succeeding in a new, own project?

As mentioned before, entrepreneurs in culture and arts need to possess a relatively wide range of skills – both creative and business – that can be acquired throughout their career. It is often pointed out that educational institutions are not flexible enough to offer programmes that would enhance entrepreneurial skills (Leadbeater and Oakley, 2005), and that certain skills can be learned only from peers. Therefore, due to the lack of appropriate training opportunities creative potential might be unrealised or even wasted.

Not only American conservatoires stress the importance of aspects other than artistic excellence in the professional life of a musician. Many European music universities offer courses related to arts management, music production, career management etc. In Poland every academy of music has introduced courses on marketing of culture and social communication. But – as mentioned before – as long as these are “additional” courses, only topping the schedule which is very strenuous anyway, they will never play the role of instilling entrepreneurial spirit. Fritsch and Sorgner remind that entrepreneurial abilities can be developed through three main routes – cognitive approach, where knowledge plays the main part, personality approach – focusing on characteristics relevant to entrepreneurial persons, such as curiosity, openness to experience, etc., and finally context approach – where not only individual personality plays a role, but the environment, which means that entrepreneurial attitude may be learned from observing entrepreneurial role models (Fritsch and Sorgner, 2013, p. 5–7). It is quite unfortunate that in most arts schools only the first of these routes is taken into consideration. New knowledge is provided through – usually – traditional means of lectures and workshops. Even this approach, however, can be adapted according to ideas proposed by Jerry Gustafson: „Entrepreneurship is a form of performance, and ultimately, one learns to perform only by

doing. (...) What is remarkable about the conservatory methods is the resolute focus on performance – on the doing of art. Entrepreneurship, whether conceived as business or art, is similarly about action. If artists are best taught through doing, it would appear natural to teach them entrepreneurship as doing” (Gustafson, 2011, p. 73–74).

Such methods are explored by some European conservatories, most notably the Sibelius Academy of Music in Helsinki, which established a student-run concert agency, shifting the responsibility for organisation of student events to adepts of musical profession. Other schools, especially the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London take a different approach. Students take a compulsory course called Independent Performance Project, where each student is expected to create, produce and deliver a performance in a venue of their choice, outside of the conservatory – usually in a community centre, hospital, primary school, art gallery etc. Such practical methods of teaching can be a good way of awakening students’ entrepreneurial potential in safe conditions of the academy, with the help of their tutors, but exposing them to the real-life challenges of the music sector employment.

5. In conclusion

If we agree that the entrepreneurial attitude is a desirable quality of contemporary musicians, it is worth considering how such an attitude might be instilled and maintained. Promoting musician’s – and more broadly, artist’s – entrepreneurship requires much more than efforts of particular music universities or training centres. Cultural and educational policies need to be revised and include incentives – organisational, legal and financial – leading to the development of closer co-operation between educational institutions and future employers. Creating more opportunities to learn new skills at various stages of professional career also seems a priority. That is linked with a general promotion of lifelong learning attitude, as an indispensable aspect of contemporary professional and socio-cultural life.

What remains probably the biggest challenge in both initial and continuing education is a constant motivation of students, graduates and experienced professionals to develop important qualities of their professional life, namely: awareness of one’s own potential and opportunities that either exist or can be created, sensibility to signs sent by communities where artists live and work, and where they can make best use of their talents and skills, and finally perseverance and determination to explore, to realise their own artistic dreams and to prove that the arts still matter in contemporary societies.

To conclude, it is worth noting that there is a clear need of further research in this particular field in Poland. The role of artists in the society and changes in the labour market have been redefining skills and professional

attitudes of musicians. There is not enough data on the labour market entrance of artists, and whatever is available, concerns mostly those who have received their education through formal higher education system. It would be also interesting to find out how artistic education (formal and non-formal) influences entrepreneurial attitudes. Another aspect worth researching is a possible collaboration of employers and higher education institutions in shaping and developing curricula in such a way that graduates could see their professional career as meeting their personal and professional needs.

Research exploring the entrepreneurship of musicians might be useful not only for strictly academic purposes, to build a specific body of knowledge. It is also essential that this type of research is applied for public policies making – educational, cultural and social, to make use of the potential of the force behind those entrepreneurs who “are visionary social leaders, strategic managers and social innovators, and (...) achieve creative, economic and social results” (Varbanova, 2013, p. 19).

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