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# Last summer, I gave you my song: singing restrictions for amateur choirs in summer 2021 following scores of hard days

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## Presentation abstract

One of the many problems encountered during Covid restrictions related to the Government's response to singing. While professional choirs were eventually permitted to sing together, restrictions imposed by the government remained in place longer for amateur choirs. But what does 'professional choirs' as opposed to 'amateur choirs' mean? Seeking their reasoning, I emailed the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport asking for clarity. The second of three replies to me about the definitions stated that "professional and amateur singing is distinguished by the fact that professional singers will be paid for this act as part of their livelihood, while amateur singers will not" (DCMS, 1/7/21). My response included "When amateurs are paid for singing does that mean that their payment is not part of their livelihood? Does this have tax implications?" (1/7/21)

Governments need clear-cut, simple definitions, but are the definitions they have applied to this area of musical life correct? Scholarship about professional and amateur music-makers by Ruth Finnegan, Stephen Cottrell, and Robert Stebbins, seems to point to the fact the main distinction between professional and amateur in this context is reliant on individual, self-definition. My paper draws on experiences of contemporary music-makers, examining original data collected between 2020 and 2021. It teases out answers about professional and amateur music-making before replying to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, who say, in their third reply (2/8/21), that they would be "more than happy" for me to send them a copy of my work.

Today I address aspects of amateur and professional music-making highlighted by restrictions on singing imposed during Covid-19 lockdowns. My paper has four sections. The first recalls online comments relating to UK singing restrictions in Summer 2021. The second draws on correspondence between myself and the government. The third considers published information and academic literature about professional and amateur music-making. The fourth, supported by original data, offers a new, robust definition for 'professional musician'.

## Online comments

Covid restrictions plunged the United Kingdom into lockdown on Monday 23 April 2020. On Monday 17th May 2021 the UK Government issued new guidance permitting choirs to sing together in person, rather than solely online. However, on Tuesday 18 May guidance changed, putting limitations on 'amateur choirs', an act that generated fury in many music-making communities. Frustration was evident in online tweets including Declan Costello's Retweet of this from Jo Stevens:

More chaos and confusion from this Government on indoor choir rehearsals. After the go ahead was given on Monday, last minute @DCMS guidance limits them to just 6 people. Why the late guidance & will they publish the evidence? #choirsmatter (Stevens, May 20, 2021).

Facebook posts show further frustration. Jonathan Willcocks writes:

I am intrigued to read the following in yesterday's *Observer* newspaper. 'The *Royal Choral Society*, one of the country's oldest and largest amateur choirs, is continuing rehearsals for a performance of Handel's *Messiah* at the Royal Albert Hall in London next weekend. "Our view is that, although our choir is made up of amateur singers, it is operating in a professional environment with a paying audience and is therefore within the guidelines"' (Willcocks, 24 May 2021).

There were two main problems. First, was the timing. Second, restrictions based on a distinction between amateur and professional music-makers are nonsensical. Such restrictions fail on at least two counts. First, as Marcus Beale, an architect and musician, recently commented, "logically singing should either be allowed or not. Status of performer has no health effect" (private email, 20 February 2022). Second, what did the Government mean by 'professional' and/or 'amateur' singers?

In May 2021 I contacted the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). My email said

It is not clear what is meant by the terms amateur and/or professional musicians [...] while the terms 'amateur and/or professional' might be assumed to be understood, it is a surprisingly grey area, an area that is part of my PhD research (Beale, 25 May 2021).

I gave reasons supporting my claim, continuing

Putting restrictions on music rehearsals based on a distinction between amateur and professional music-makers seems nonsensical. [...] Perhaps you would be willing to reconsider your recent decision about 'amateur music rehearsals' (Beale, 25 May, 2021).

I share three sections from the DCMS reply. The first line is interesting in light of Sue Gray's report. The second part gives some of the DCMS's guidance, and the final section advises me how to escalate complaints.

We must continue to make decisions based on the advice of our public health experts. [...] The Performing Arts Guidance states that non-professional singing indoors should only take place in a single group of up to 6 people. This limit does not apply to professional activity. [...] If you remain dissatisfied with DCMS, you can contact your Member of Parliament (DCMS, 22 June 2021 Our Ref: TO2021/12446).

It was not obvious how contacting my MP would clarify things. I emailed DCMS again, asking what they meant by the terms 'professional' and 'amateur' musicians on 22 June 2020. They replied

For the purposes of the Performing Arts Guidance, professional and amateur singing is distinguished by the fact that professional singers will be paid for this activity as part of their livelihood, while amateur singers will not. I hope this clarifies the position (DCMS, Our Ref: TO2021/12703 Response Letter 1 July 2021).

My response included "When amateurs are paid for singing does that mean that their payment is not part of their livelihood? Does this have tax implications?" (1 July 2021).

Amateur music-makers, including buskers, are sometimes paid for music-making. Preventing amateur choirs from singing affects musicians' livelihoods. Indeed, as Frank Shera says

In the kingdom of music the amateur is an indispensable part of the constitution: without him the professional could not continue to exist. It is a curious thing that so little attention has been given to his history. As a composer he is sometimes a nuisance. As a performer (unless he is self-taught) he provides the professional with some of his income, as a listener with the rest (Shera, 1970:vii).

Even if one disregards most activities connected to musicking, as eloquently explained by Christopher Small (1998), certain choir leaders, and/or accompanists are reliant on engaging with ‘amateur singers’ for some of their livelihood.

Moreover, classifying someone as a ‘professional’ musician on a monetary basis is capricious. Finnegan states “neither payment nor amount of time provides an unambiguous basis for differentiating ‘professionals’ from ‘amateurs’; the difference is at best only a relative one” (2007:14). Furthermore, she explains

local bands sometimes contained some players in full-time (non-musical) jobs and others whose only regular occupation was their music [...]. A number of band members regarded their playing as their only employment (perhaps also drawing unemployment or other benefits), but how far they actually made money from it was a moot point (Finnegan, 2007:13).

Cottrell says

while we may superficially make the distinction between the professional who is paid for their work and the amateur who is not, the situation on the ground is more ambiguous. [...] There are many who would think of themselves as professional musicians even though they may have

incomes from other sources; I know a musician who sells paintings, another who writes, another with a small private income, several who rent property, and so on. But I have no doubt that they (and I) would describe themselves as 'professional' musicians (Cottrell, 2004:9-10).

## Academic literature

So what is a 'professional' musician? GOV.UK publishes a list of forty-seven examples of professionals recognised as valid counter signatories for passports. It does not include 'musician', 'singer', or 'composer', yet 'teacher' is included. This is problematic because Cottrell says teaching is not considered part of a professional musician's work. He states

nearly all the musicians I know do some form or other of teaching, but [...] since teaching is generally regarded as something qualitatively different to paid musical employment this does create difficulties in the use of the term 'professional' (Cottrell, 2004:10).

Furthermore, he adds

"Work" is the term given by professional musicians to their paid musical production, be it giving concerts, paid rehearsals, recordings or other similar ventures. It does not include unpaid activities such as charity performances, unpaid rehearsals or practice; and it definitely does not include teaching, even at the London conservatoires, notwithstanding that many performers of significant rank might teach there [...] So the concept of "work", being paid for one's musical production, becomes an important symbol through which individuals partially refract their self-conception as professional musicians; and [...] it is a symbol through which they reinforce to themselves and others their sense of group identity. [...] It is because musicians share and process symbols in this way that we

can consider this group as a “community” (Cottrell, 2004:11).

Cottrell’s findings highlight six important points. First, the method of becoming a professional musician is not formulaic. Second, differences between ‘professional’ or ‘amateur’ are ambiguous. Indeed, Finnegan points out “One of the interesting characteristics of local music organization is precisely the *absence* of an absolute distinction between “the amateur” and “the professional”” (2007:15). Third, financial reward is not limited to merely earning money from music performance. Fourth, self-identity and recognition by others is perhaps the most important aspect of regarding oneself as a professional musician. (Indeed, Stebbins (1992) and Finnegan (2007) reinforce this point of view.) Fifth, symbolic reinforcement of identity brings a sense of community to professional musicians who identify themselves, and are identified by others within the same community. Sixth, teaching is not considered part of a professional musician’s work.

How about qualifications? Stebbins states

there are professions in which there are no true amateurs, professions in which the common sense viewpoint must, of necessity, centre on measurable criteria other than that “better than” criterion. [...] In the work of nurses, lawyers, physicians, schoolteachers, [...] professional qualifications are determined by examination and state-run licensing procedures. One becomes a professional in these fields by



passing the appropriate test and receiving a licence to practise (Stebbins, 1992:22).

However, music qualifications do not confirm professional status. For example, Dame Vera Lynn had one (unsuccessful) singing lesson and claimed that she could not read music. All the members of the rock band *Queen* gained university qualifications. Brian May has a PhD in Astrophysics. Freddie Mercury had a degree in Graphic Design and Illustration, Roger Taylor gained a degree in Biology, and John Deacon earned a degree in Electronics. None were in music. *The Beatles* had no music qualifications. Bach did not hold university qualifications. (Hendrie, 1991; Wolff, 2000; Shuckburgh, 2009, for example). Wolff explains

the only major candidate [applying for the post of capellmeister at St Thomas] without a university education was Bach (all his predecessors in the St Thomas cantorate since the sixteenth century and all his successors until well into the nineteenth century were university trained) (Wolff, 2000:221).

Formal music qualifications are not prerequisites for professional musicians.

Additionally, Cottrell states “the description of ‘professional’ is a flexible, negotiable term whose meaning inheres through use rather than through unambiguous definition” (2004:10). Finnegan says

in local music [...] the interrelationship and overlap between [...] the amateur/professional distinction] is both highly significant for local practise and also of central interest for

the wider functioning of music as it is in fact practised today. [...] Another interesting feature of the 'amateur'/'professional' contrast lies in differing interpretations by the participants themselves. When local musicians use the term "professional" they often refer to evaluative rather than economic aspects (Finnegan, 2007:13-15).

A quick look at the term 'amateur' musicians shows the word 'amateur' comes from the

French, *Amateur* someone who loves (a person) [...or] (an abstract concept), someone with a strong interest (in a thing or an activity), [..., and] from Classical Latin, *amātor* lover, devoted friend, enthusiastic admirer (OED online).

Misconceptions include that an amateur musician loves music but a professional musician does not. Amateurs always perform unpaid. Amateurs perform both to a lower standard compared to their counterparts who identify as 'professional'.

Shera points out "the word 'amateur' does not seem to have established itself in English until the early nineteenth century. [...] But the distinction is ancient". Both Plato and Aristotle had "a good deal to say" [about music education] [...]

the chief thing to be learnt about amateur music in Roman times is the taste of Roman audiences for foreign professionals. [...] The practice of music was regarded as beneath the dignity of a Roman citizen, or even of his wife and daughters (Shera, 1939:1-2).

Moreover, being referred to as a 'professional musician' was considered derogatory for Royalty and nobility, however skilled they were at musicking. As Shera says "towards the end of the eighteenth century it was customary to describe an amateur as a gentleman player" (1970:46). Stebbins says there was a point at which

amateurs could be distinguished from professionals by social class. Whannel (1983:43) notes that, "in the nineteenth century, those who played sport for money belonged to the lower class, while those who played purely for enjoyment belonged to the upper class" (Stebbins, 2012: 36).

Today, neither class, qualifications, length of time, nor payment provide a reliable distinction between professional and amateur music-makers.

## Robust definition

Understanding the difference between professional and amateur musicians involves considering complex interrelationships between people, music identity, societies, and music-making communities.

Obviously it is important to consider, as Cook explains,

there are some societies where this distinction [being a musician] wouldn't be intelligible, such as the Suyá Indians of Brazil, but in modern Western society being a musician is different from being someone who just listens to music (Cook, 2000:6).

However, the key to understanding what a ‘professional musician’ is in Western society, is to understand both where the word ‘profession’ came from, and what it means.

Originally the word ‘profession’ related

to the declaration of a promise, or vow made by a person entering a religious order; (hence) the action of entering such an order; the fact or occasion of being professed in a religious order (OED online).

Although these details might seem irrelevant they are, in fact, of utmost importance. The *Oxford English Dictionary* continues “any solemn declaration, promise, or vow”. Moreover, ‘profession’ strongly relates to

the action or an act of declaring, affirming, or avowing an opinion, belief, custom, etc., or of laying open claim to a particular quality or feeling (OED online).

Being accepted as a ‘professional musician’ relies on a specific series of interrelated events.

- First, self-identifying as a professional musician.
- Second, an act of declaring, affirming, avowing and laying claim to belonging to the music order as a professional musician.
- Third, the music-making community accepting and recognising the musician who has professed, declared their vow.
- Fourth, the person needs to be ‘welcomed’ into the music-making community and act as one who belongs to that community.

- Fifth, people both inside and outside the music-making community affirm, confirm, respect, and accept the vow, the declaration of the musician.

## Data

How does my recent data relate to these findings? At first glance the data appeared confusing. In one-to-one interviews I asked what the term ‘professional’ and ‘amateur’ meant to individual participants, and whether they considered ‘professional/amateur’ had different meanings in Truro (my research area) and London, Cambridge or Wales, for example. In response to my question “do you think that somebody in Truro would consider [...] people professional who wouldn’t be considered professional [...] where you are?”, Freddie Brown, former chorister at Truro Cathedral, currently conductor and pianist at the Welsh National Opera, says “No, [...] I think as much as anything, it’s a self-defining thing. If someone says they are a professional musician then that’s what they are” (interview, 2021).

Katherine Gregory, the first girl chorister to sing a solo at Truro Cathedral, when asked “What do you think about the term ‘professional’?” replied “I’ve never been a professional in a choir, if that makes sense. Truro [Cathedral Choir] is a professional choir but I was

just a student, and Trinity [College Choir, University of Cambridge] is just a student choir". Moreover, she said, "For me, it's quite a grey area between what's 'student', and [...] what's 'professional' or what's 'amateur'". I asked "Do you think that the terms 'professional' and 'amateur' are considered differently by people in London, [...] Cambridge, and Truro?" Gregory replied "Yeah!" (interview, 2021).

Data seem to show that responses depend on the musical status of the participant, their own self-identification in terms of musicking. Thus rather than the vowing being different, it is the community of music-makers interpreting the vows that provides a difference. This confirms Finnegan's observation about contrast lying "in differing interpretations by the participants themselves" (Finnegan, 2007), as mentioned above.

To conclude, scholars including Stebbins, Finnegan and Cottrell appear correct in suggesting that self-identification holds a major part to unlocking the meaning of 'professional' and/or 'amateur' musicians. Thus, my definition can be seen as robust. A professional musician identifies as a musician by 'professing' to themselves and to the community that they self-identify as a musician. Their vow is recognised by others. The musician is accepted into the music-making community by those within it, and is recognised as 'professional' by people outside that community. The musician lives their life according to the vows they

made to be a musician. They recognise themselves, and are accepted by others, to be part of the community of professional music-makers.

My third email to DCMS included “the current restrictions [...] are nonsensical because [...] the] categorisation is flawed” (1 July 2020).

Their reply included “I appreciate your comments and would be more than happy for you to send us a copy of your thesis once completed” (2 August 2020). Indeed, for several reasons, I look forward to sending the DCMS a copy of my thesis.

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