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## From Unspeakability to Inequality Talk: Why Conversations about Inequalities May Not Pave the Way for Change

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This article draws on 18 qualitative in-depth interviews with female, early-career classical musicians to investigate if, and if so how, recent discourse around the lack of diversity in the classical music profession has affected how young musicians talk about inequalities in the field of classical music. The article demonstrates that the research participants were aware of ongoing inequalities and discussed them openly. This marks an important shift from previously conducted research, which highlighted the 'unspeakability' of inequalities in the classical music profession and the cultural and creative industries. By drawing on discursive psychology, this article explores the rhetorical and ideological work that such 'inequality talk' performs, arguing that conversations about inequalities may not necessarily pave the way for political change. Divided into three analytical sections, the article demonstrates that inequality talk can become an end in itself, rather than a means to an end (such as political change); that a fatalist sentiment can characterise discussions of inequalities, presenting structural change as unachievable; and that acknowledgement and recognition of privilege, crucial to overcoming inequalities, is not a consistent feature of inequality talk, which in turn risks reinforcing the normativity of whiteness and middle-classness in the field of classical music. Overall, the article cautions against overly optimistic accounts of the shift towards a more open discussion of inequalities in the classical music profession and beyond.

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## Introduction

Discourse around the lack of diversity in the classical music profession has gained increased traction in the UK over recent years. There have been a range of initiatives to promote women, musicians with disabilities, as well as Black and minority-ethnic players. Examples include **Keychange**, an international campaign which encourages music festivals and conferences to sign up to a 50:50 gender balance pledge by 2022; **SWAPR'ra**, which seeks to effect positive change for women and parents in opera; Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra's **Resound**, a professional disabled-led ensemble; and **Chineke! Orchestra**, Europe's first majority BAME orchestra. In addition, reports have been published on sexual harassment in the music sector (e.g. Incorporated Society of Musicians, 2018), and there are campaigns to end sexual harassment, such as **#ProtectFreelancersToo**, run by the Musicians' Union. These interventions have been widely discussed in the classical music industry. As Chi-Chi Nwanoku (2019) observed, 'the lack of diversity in British orchestras, and the arts in general, is at the forefront of current debates in the UK classical music industry'.

In parallel to these developments, 'there has been a virtual explosion of feminist discussion in both popular and mainstream media' (Farris and Rottenberg, 2017: 5). In contrast to a period in the 1990s and 2000s when rejections of feminism were widespread (McRobbie, 2009), feminism is now highly visible and embraced by celebrities as well as promoted in bestselling books and in a vibrant activist scene. Feminism, to use Sarah Banet-Weiser's analysis, 'has become, somewhat incredibly, *popular*' (2018: 1). Feminism's popularity, as well as increased discussion of inequalities in the cultural and creative industries, has affected how cultural workers talk about the fields that they work in. As Brook et al. (2021: 498) have demonstrated, "'inequality talk" and the recognition of structural barriers for marginalised groups is a dominant discourse' in the cultural and creative industries (see also Scharff, 2020). This is a relatively recent phenomenon, which contrasts with earlier accounts of the 'unspeakability' of inequalities in the cultural and creative industries (Gill, 2014), including the classical music profession (Scharff, 2018).

The recognition of inequalities is an important starting point for change (Brook et al., 2021; Gill, 2018). The prevalence of 'inequality talk', to use Brook et al.'s (2021) terminology, does, however, raise the question of the rhetorical mechanisms that are at play in these conversations, and the ideological and political work they perform. By drawing on interviews with female, early-career classical musicians, this article explores the emancipatory potential of the research participants' inequality talk. The key question is: do the musicians' accounts of inequalities pave the way for social change? In order to find answers to this question, the article employs the analytical

framework of discursive psychology, which is an approach that has long shown how ‘inequality and dominance are produced and reproduced in talk’ (Tileaga, 2006: 479). From a theoretical perspective, the article is informed by scholarly critiques of diversity discourse and initiatives in the cultural and creative industries (e.g. De Benedictis et al., 2017; Mellinger, 2003; Saha, 2018). This body of work has shown that these initiatives can ‘actually serve as an ideological function that sustains the institutional whiteness of the cultural industries even while they claim (often genuinely so) to do something more inclusive’ (Saha, 2018: 88; see also Mellinger, 2003). And as Sara de Benedictis, Kim Allen, and Tracey Jensen have argued, ‘while class is now “on the agenda”, this is not necessarily “progressive”’ (2017: 343). As wider critiques of diversity discourses (Bell and Hartmann, 2007) and discussions about racial hierarchies (e.g. DiAngelo, 2011; Hastie and Rimmington, 2014) have shown, talk about inequalities does not necessarily lead to social change.

A second body of research that informs this article consists of critical analyses of the popularity of feminism (e.g. Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2016; Rottenberg, 2018) and how feminism’s heightened visibility has affected women’s sense-making of gender and intersecting inequalities (Orgad, 2019; Scharff, 2020). These analyses point to marked resonances between the most visible forms of feminism and a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2016), including an emphasis on individualism, notions of empowerment and choice, and women’s self-transformation. Rather than focus on liberation from sexist and unequal social, political, and economic structures, so-called ‘popular feminism’ has empowerment as its central logic (Banet-Weiser, 2018). And as Catherine Rottenberg (2018) has argued in her discussion of the rise of popular forms of feminism, which she calls ‘neoliberal feminism’, feminist themes have become increasingly compatible with neoliberalism, where women take it upon themselves to manage ongoing gender inequalities. More generally, mainstream media and public discourses now endorse, rather than repudiate, feminism. However, there remain strong continuities between popular forms of feminism, neoliberalism, and a postfeminist sensibility.

## Overview

This article contributes to these bodies of work by analysing young, female musicians’ inequality talk. After a discussion of the research methodology underpinning the data presented here, the first analytical section demonstrates that inequalities were discussed at length in the interviews. The research participants celebrated the shift towards more open conversations about inequalities and portrayed disapproval of unequal work cultures and practices as common-sensical. The positive, affective register of their talk side-lined anger, indignation and complaint, which I argue has a

silencing effect by portraying ongoing inequalities as ‘ridiculous’ and therefore almost not worthy of discussion. In addition, there is a risk that talk about inequalities becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to facilitate social change. The second section of the article identifies an alternative affective register, namely a fatalist discourse that portrays social change as impossible and inequalities as unavoidable. This form of inequality talk was marked by a sense of a lack of agency, as well as acceptance of the status quo. Though different in affective orientation from celebratory accounts of the increased awareness of inequalities, the fatalist discourse also did not encourage social change on a rhetorical level.

The third, and final analytical section shows that recognition of privilege, which is key to overcoming inequality, was not consistently present in the research participants’ accounts. Some disavowed white and middle-class privilege, while others were acutely aware of the privileges that their particular positionings entailed. On the whole, the classical music scene was portrayed as a space that does not allow for critical examination of privilege, thus risking the re-inscription of whiteness and middle-classness as normative (Bull, 2019). Inequality talk that fails to acknowledge privilege acts as another discursive site that rhetorically hampers, rather than facilitate, social change. In offering a detailed analysis of inequality talk and the rhetorical mechanisms that impede, rather than encourage, social change, this article seeks to contribute to our understanding of why inequalities persist despite endorsements of diversity in the classical music profession and the heightened visibility of feminism in public and media discourse. The article thus adds to our understanding of equality and diversity in the classical music profession. This is an important issue, not only because it relates to social justice, but also because the demographic makeup of the cultural workforce affects who gets to make culture and how, in turn, we understand ourselves as a society.

### **Conducting Research on Inequality Talk in the Classical Music Profession**

This article is based on 18, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with early-career classical musicians. As such, it forms part of a wider body of scholarly research into the working conditions in the cultural and creative industries. In many contemporary western societies, the so-called ‘creative industries’ have been hailed as a key growth sector of the economy, source of future employment, driver of urban regeneration, and promoter of inclusivity. Academic research, and particularly approaches informed by Cultural Studies and Sociology, has however critiqued this positive narrative, especially in relation to prevailing working conditions. For example, work in the cultural and creative industries is characterised by a range of inequalities (Gill; 2014; Taylor and Littleton, 2012).

Resonating with wider research on the cultural and creative industries, studies have shown that the classical music profession features a range of gender, racial, and class inequalities, such as underrepresentation and horizontal and vertical segregation (Bull, 2019; Scharff, 2018). Critically, inequalities in the classical music sector are not limited to these issues. In relation to gender, for example, they also pertain to a pay gap and the particular challenges that female musicians encounter when negotiating a range of contradictory expectations around femininity, sexuality, and appearance, which also intersect with race (Yoshihara, 2007) and class (Bull, 2019). Sexual harassment is prevalent in the classical music industry (Incorporated Society of Musicians, 2018) and there is a high level of non-reporting (*ibidem*; Scharff, 2020), which is largely due to the precarious work conditions that characterise the classical music profession (for more on careers in music, see for example Mills, 2005). This article explores negotiations of inequalities in the classical music profession to shed light on a sector that is not frequently discussed in wider research on the cultural and creative industries (but see Bull, 2019; Scharff, 2018).

Given the study's focus on female musicians' negotiations of inequalities, the use of qualitative interviews was most suitable. Interviews provide insight into subjective experiences and meanings (Rubin and Rubin, 1995) and are a useful methodological tool to explore how the research participants experienced and interpreted working in the classical music profession. The interviews that I conducted were semi-structured. Asking different research participants the same questions offered an important point for comparison. My questions covered the musicians' training and education, their experiences of working in the classical music field, as well as their views on (in)equalities and diversity in the industry. The interviews were conducted in London in 2019, and early-career musicians were defined as those who were at the end of their studies, had recently returned to higher education, or had graduated within the last five years. I focused on early-career musicians because I had conducted research with a similar demographic in 2012/2013 (Scharff, 2018) and found that inequalities were 'unspeakable' at that time. Interviewing female, early-career musicians seven years on enabled me to explore whether and, if so, how, the shift towards an increased awareness and discussion of inequalities in the classical music industry has affected musicians' sense-making.

I spoke to singers, conductors, composers and instrumentalists who mostly worked on a freelance basis. As evident from this list, some research participants worked in male dominated fields, such as conducting, whilst others played instruments that attract a lot of women, such as the flute. However, these differences did not come strongly to the fore in the inequality talk analysed here. Reflecting the demographic

make-up of the classical music profession in the UK, specifically in relation to the lack of diversity in terms of race and class (Scharff, 2018), three research participants were mixed race (Black-African/white; Pakistani/white and East Asian/white), one East Asian, and fourteen white. One research participant described her background as lower middle-class, three as working-class, and fourteen as middle-class. The research participants were aged 23–31, with the majority being in their late twenties. Having obtained approval by King’s Arts and Humanities Research Ethics Panel (Ref: LRS-18/19-8903), I recruited research participants by using personal and professional contacts and subsequent snowballing. Following this process meant that I spoke to research participants that I did not know personally. Each interviewee was given an information sheet, which included details about the project, but also covered important ethical issues such as the right to withdraw, confidentiality, anonymity, and the use of pseudonyms. Prior to each interview, I discussed these issues with the research participants and obtained their informed consent. Interviews, which lasted between sixty and eighty minutes, were recorded and subsequently transcribed. I analysed the data by using NVivo software for initial coding and discursive psychology.

I used discursive psychology to analyse the research participants’ accounts because it has long been concerned with the construction, legitimation, and negotiation of inequality in talk (Tileaga, 2006). My approach is informed by Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell’s early writings (1987), critical discursive psychology (e.g. Edley and Wetherell, 2001), and more recent modifications of this work (e.g. Taylor and Littleton, 2012), which have applied the insights of discursive psychology to the study of subjective experiences of work in the cultural and creative industries. According to Rom Harré and Grant Gillett, discursive psychology is concerned with ‘language in use as the accomplishment of acts or as attempts at their accomplishment’ (1994: 32). It seeks to demonstrate how social order is produced through discursive interaction. This means that social and psychological phenomena are interpreted as features of discourse. Discursive psychology thus enables analysis of musicians’ subjective experiences and talk about inequalities.

Through this lens, I analysed the interviews by looking for patterns relating, for example, to the ways in which the research participants talked about gender, racial and class inequalities. In each section, I illustrate these patterns by providing short extracts from a larger dataset. As Stephanie Taylor and Karen Littleton (2012: 44–45) have emphasised,

although any example of talk is from an individual speaker, a woman, a man, a certain age and so on, they are not approached as “types”. For this reason, speakers are

labelled minimally in the data extracts which are presented [...]. The extracts from their interviews are illustrative examples of features of the talk of many speakers, although, of course, their circumstances were specific to themselves in the detail.

Following this approach, I refrain from providing demographic information about each participant when I discuss individual statements, unless it is absolutely essential to make sense of their claims. More generally, this approach has aided me in preserving the anonymity of the research participants. Given the underrepresentation of women as well as Black and minority ethnic musicians, some research participants might be identified easily. By refraining from providing the demographic information of individual research participants, I also seek to underline that my aim is not to single out individual speakers, but to analyse the ideological and political consequences of the rhetorical patterns that can be found in inequality talk.

#### **'It's Kind of in Fashion, Almost': Positivity, Silencing and 'Economies of Visibility'**

The research participants stated that there was now more of a discussion of inequalities. Kimberly reflected on being a teenager and seeing an orchestra which did not feature any women: 'I was a bit shocked. I think that is less the case now, ten years later because people are more aware of it and there's more of a discussion around that point.' Felicity, a composer, echoed Kimberly's views. When she started out

the conversation about women composers was niche at best. And, well. Even I, I sort of felt like if you brought it up you would be sort of like labelled as sort of trying to use that for something, you know. Whereas now, people, it's mainstream. It's a mainstream conversation.

Similarly, Sally stated that there is now more awareness of gender inequalities:

I was coaching a symphony orchestra brass section last week. And they were like, 'Oh, more women than ever before at this concert that we went to'. So, people are obviously more aware of it. I think because it's been in the news. I think the whole thing about female conductors sparked off the debate. So, I think more and more people are becoming aware of it, which is good.

These statements indicate that inequalities are now more openly discussed in the world of classical music. According to Harriet, 'women in music, it's talked about a lot amongst women, amongst my female conductor friends, definitely'. Referring to conversations about female musicians having children, Suzanne observed:

It's actually something that has been more spoken about in the last couple of years than it ever has been before, interestingly [...] It is becoming more part of a regular conversation, which is good, because it used to be that it just wasn't really spoken about. Or it was just assumed that if you want this career, then you're not interested in doing kind of like, the normal family thing as well.

Indeed, and, as Jessica argued, feminist issues and concerns are now on the agenda:

Even since I've been at university, like, talking about feminism is more... It, like, it's on the agenda of just young people [...] I think there's a cultural shift that is happening, like, before our eyes, which is interesting you know. That it's kind of... It's kind of in fashion, almost.

The research participants' statements illustrate the effects of recent, cultural changes, and indicate that the heightened visibility of feminism has affected the conversations that are taking place amongst musicians and in the classical music profession more generally.

The increased awareness of, and discussion about, inequalities raises the question of the nature of this form of talk and what it does rhetorically. Perhaps not surprisingly, the recent shift towards a more open discussion of inequalities was often couched in positive terms. Sally and Suzanne both use the term 'good' when reflecting on these changes. Similarly, Isabelle referred to the #MeToo movement, stating that 'there's more respect or a lot more conscious thought about the way women are treated' and concluded her remarks by saying 'it's great, it's really good and important that it's talked about more now.' By labelling the increased awareness and talk about inequalities as 'good' and 'great', the research participants construct it as a positive development, but also portray themselves as supporters of a more open conversation about gendered power relations in the classical music industry. The 'feeling rules' (Gill and Kanai, 2019) attached to accounts about the increased awareness of inequalities seem to be about positivity. More specifically, the research participants' positive outlook resonates with dominant 'feeling rules' in neoliberal and postfeminist culture which 'favour positive affect and outlaw "negative" feelings, specifically anger, indignation and complaint' (Orgad, 2019: 179). Arguably, the positive register of inequality talk directs attention away from feelings of anger, resentment, or outrage. These feelings, however, can be more politicising than positivity, and may constitute more of a threat to the status quo.

As Kimberly's story of a female conductor attempting to share her experiences of inequalities illustrates, the mainstreaming of inequality talk, and related feeling rules, can also have a silencing effect. Sharing her recent experience of playing in a small



orchestra and working with a female conductor, Kimberly told me that the conductor 'had come up with a lot, come against a lot of trouble being a woman in that profession' and 'definitely discussed it in front of you know, all of our orchestra'. I subsequently inquired what the discussion was like, and Kimberly responded:

I think people were listening and they were very much.... They just thought that it was ridiculous that she would be judged on the fact that she was a woman, when clearly she was so good at what she did. I think people, think of it as just kind of 'well that's, that shouldn't be the case'. And that was kind of it. So, I guess in a way, that wasn't helpful for her because it was something she was facing and perhaps people were kind of brushing it off because in our view, it was like 'Well, that's ridiculous. You shouldn't, you shouldn't be up against this sort of thing'.

Using the adjective 'ridiculous' twice and highlighting the orchestra's unanimous view that these inequalities should not exist, Kimberly constructs the disapproval of power imbalances as common-sensical. As she acknowledges by saying that 'perhaps people were kind of brushing it off', the view that 'you shouldn't be up against this sort of thing' can also have a silencing effect. Crucially, the silencing of the conductor's experiences takes place in and through a positive and affirmative register that takes a strong normative stance *against* inequalities. These inequalities can be described as 'ridiculous' precisely because of the common-sensical nature of the orchestra's disapproval of ongoing gendered hierarchies. In this case, the widely shared disapproval of inequalities has the potential to lead to a situation where individual concerns are silenced.

A further concern about the increased awareness and discussion of inequalities relates to the link between talk and tangible, political change. Some research participants voiced their fears that conversations did not necessarily lead to change. Felicity, who had stated that the discussion about the lack of female composers was mainstream, told me:

I do worry about whether it's a thing where in two years they'll go: "Okay, well, we've done the women composer thing. That's done now and move on".

Sally expressed a similar fear:

There is a lot more conversation about it [inequalities]. I think that's what makes it different [...]. But I'm not sure that the actual situation has changed. I think it takes longer to change.

Having discussed some diversity initiatives, Beatrice told me: ‘I know that all the orchestras and stuff have mission statements. But I just don’t see any evidence in the actual, what they do. I don’t see any change. Don’t see any, sort of, willingness to actually do anything’.

Of course, awareness of inequalities is a first important step to facilitate change (Gill, 2018). Inequalities are only open to challenge as long as they are visible and representable (Calder-Dawe, 2015). Against this backdrop, and especially the previously documented unspeakability of inequalities, the increased awareness and discussion of gendered hierarchies in the classical music profession marks an important shift. However, borrowing from Banet-Weiser’s (2018: 23) analysis of the popularity of feminism, there is a risk that talk about inequalities ‘becomes *the end* rather than a means to an end’. Developing the notion of ‘economies of visibility’ to critically analyse the recent popularity of feminism, Banet-Weiser (2018: 23) argues that there has been a shift from a politics of visibility to an economy of visibility; ‘rather than a politics of visibility, where the visibility itself is a route to politics, visibility becomes enough in itself’. As Banet-Weiser emphasises, visibility is important, but it often stops there. Applying these insights to an analysis of the increased awareness and discussion of inequalities in the classical music profession suggests there is a risk that talk about inequalities becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to changing unequal power-relations.

### **A Fatalist Sentiment: Constructing Change as Impossible**

The research participants’ awareness of inequalities, along with their uncertainty about whether change would happen, meant that a fatalist sentiment transpired through numerous accounts. Molly told me she had experienced sexual misconduct, sharing a story about one of her male teachers who ‘got progressively out of order over 18 months’. Molly felt it ‘was a shame to have had to go through that’ and finished her story by saying:

There’s been lots of little things. That was the longest experience. I’ve had lots of like, you know, conductors making comments and stuff like that. But that’s life. I don’t think that’s going to change. Humiliating, but what can you do?

By describing its effects as humiliating, Molly shows her awareness of the inappropriateness of her teacher’s behaviours. At the same time, she expresses a fatalist sentiment by claiming that ‘that’s life’ and asking ‘what can you do?’.

A fatalist sentiment did not only transpire in narratives about personal experiences of sexual harassment and misconduct (see also Scharff, 2020), but also in discussions

about the exclusionary nature of music education in the UK. Having been asked a broader question about her views on (in)equalities and diversity in the classical music sector, Jenny told me that the classical music scene was

still like a predominantly kind of white middle-class thing. I think it's going to take a long, long time for that to change. Sadly, it absolutely shouldn't be. But then I guess that that stems down from which kids learnt music at school and then which kids go to music college.

Similarly, Suzanne remarked:

Sadly, I think that it's kind of, for now at least, inevitable that a lot of the future intake for students who are doing what I'm doing now, may well come from much more privileged backgrounds, because they have had the money to be able to start lessons in the first place, or they've been to a school where...Because, so my mum teaches in quite a lot of private schools and like, the facilities are just like, incredible.

And Kimberly observed that

really sadly, it [classical music] is still for people who have money [...] And I think people are trying to change it, but [...] if you can't afford to buy an instrument and send your kids to music lessons every week, then they're not going to grow up to be musicians, probably.

In these statements, the research participants reiterate dominant industry discourses, which argue that inequalities in the classical music profession stem from the cost of training. However, as Anna Bull (2019) has shown, classed and racialised exclusions are more far-reaching than a lack of sustained access to high-quality music education. The attribution of the source of classed and racialised exclusions to access to music education does not tell the whole story and leaves out other important avenues for inquiry. More important to my arguments here, however, is the fatalist sentiment that characterises Jenny's, Suzanne's and Kimberly's accounts. Jenny feels that 'it's going to take a long, long time to change', Suzanne argues that it's 'inevitable' that the next generation of classical musicians will come from privileged backgrounds, and all three express their sadness that classical music 'is still for people who have money' (Kimberly).

A fatalist sentiment was also discernible in more general discussions of inequalities in the classical music profession. Molly commented on the mainly middle/upper middle-class demographic of opera singers and audiences:

It would be really nice if kids from state schools were going and seeing people like them on stage in the first place. Like this is where it, it's the kind of chicken-egg thing, because like, you need people like them on the [hiring] panels because they are more likely to choose them. But people like them can only be on the panels if they've got to that stage in the first place. You need people like them on the stage, because then they see it, and they think 'That could be me'. And like, it's never ending.

Sharing an equally sober outlook, Ruby stated: 'So many of the issues are so entrenched, both in the classical music industry and in our society, that I don't see a massive change happening'. Likewise, Jessica told me that she had been involved in organising an all-female classical music festival, saying that 'it was really successful', but subsequently pointing out:

'Even if it keeps happening every year, which is the plan, I guess, I don't think it actually does anything. It's like, you know, a drop in the ocean'. Contrasting with the positive register identified in the celebratory accounts of the shift towards a more open discussion of inequalities, these accounts express a more pessimistic sentiment that the status quo cannot be changed.

These findings resonate with Shani Orgad's (2019) study on professional mothers' decision to quit their jobs to look after their children. Orgad (2019: 181) draws attention to a 'fatalist sentiment in current discourse about the impossibility of challenging larger structural conditions of inequality', which she also identified in the in-depth interviews she conducted as part of her research. Interestingly, one of Orgad's research participants posed the same question as Molly did ('what can you do?'), suggesting that a sense of fatalism is not only present in wider, current discourses, but also in other research contexts. This sense of fatalism can lead to feelings of a lack of agency. The question 'what can you do?' attests to a sense that there is no agency, as do the accounts that inequalities are 'never ending' or 'inevitable'. Orgad (2019: 175) links the prevailing sense of fatalism to the rise of popular and neoliberal feminism, arguing that 'many of these contemporary so-called feminist accounts and comments are underpinned by the notion that challenging structural inequalities is daunting, too big, and thus an unrealistic or even an impossible mission'. Instead of endorsing structural change, current feminist discourses 'often promote the importance of making small changes through intense self-work and self-policing, promising that this self-work will lead to empowerment and self-transformation' (Orgad, 2019: 175). I have discussed the emphasis on self-work in detail elsewhere (see Scharff, 2020), but it is interesting to note that it was also evident in the data collected for this study. The research participants provided detailed discussions of

ongoing inequalities, but these accounts frequently coexisted with an emphasis on hard work, resilience, and self-transformation. However, the emphasis on self-transformation is not far-reaching enough, contributing to a sense of fatalism and lack of agency. As the critical, scholarly analysis of popular and neoliberal feminism demonstrates, the seemingly contradictory co-existence of an acknowledgment of inequalities and desire for change on the one hand, and a fatalist sentiment on the other, makes sense if placed within the wider context of neoliberal rationality, where the possibility of structural change is disavowed, and personal responsibility and self-transformation are endorsed instead.

Critical analyses of ‘neoliberal feminism’, wider neoliberal culture and associated ‘feeling rules’ also help us make sense of the existence of the two seemingly competing affective registers that I have identified in the research participants’ inequality talk. As demonstrated in the previous section, the research participants displayed a positive outlook in their celebratory accounts of the increased awareness of inequalities. This positivity resonates with contemporary so-called feminist accounts that propose ‘a “feminist” program in which women positively and constructively develop strategies to change themselves *within* the existing capitalist and corporate realities they face’ (Gill and Orgad, 2017: 32). As we have learned, changing these realities is deemed impossible and there is instead an emphasis on self-transformation and positivity. At the same time, the portrayal of wider structural change as impossible leads to a sense of fatalism, as documented in this section. This fatalism thus seems to be linked to the positive outlook documented in my preceding analysis. Crucially, both forms of inequality talk – celebratory/positive and fatalist – do not seem to pave the way for wider, structural change, at least not in the interviews analysed here. As Banet-Weiser’s (2018) concept of ‘economies of visibility’ suggests, inequality talk risks becoming an end in itself, rather than a means to an end. Likewise, the research participants’ fatalist sentiment, and their related (if reluctant) acceptance of the status quo and perceived lack of agency construct change as unachievable. In both cases, the acknowledgement, detailed discussion and recognition of inequalities – and indeed the desire to overcome them – does not appear to lay the foundations for social change.

### **Restoring Normativities in Inequality Talk: The Importance of Examining Privilege**

Recognising privilege is key to overcoming inequalities (Hastie and Rimmington, 2014; see also Bell and Hartmann, 2007; DiAngelo, 2011). However, critical engagement with privilege, such as whiteness or being from a middle-class background, was not a consistent feature of the research participants’ inequality talk. Emma, for example, did not reflect on her class privilege when talking about her experiences of going to music college in Scotland:

It was interesting going to Scotland because a lot of people there were from poorer backgrounds than me. Again, that kind of stems from the whole brass band culture. It tends to be working-class cultures across brass bands. They're very, you know, proud of their roots of that. I mean, I was the posh one, like from day one. And never, never got rid of that really. Which was fine because I am from a posh southern...I went to a private school, very stable family. Yeah, private lessons from a very young age.

Emma continued her account by contrasting her private tuition with her peers' learning 'through, like, kind of outreach music education hubs and stuff like that', and recounting how that her mother had alerted her 'that there's going to be differences and that you will be, not like bullied, but be kind of teased about certain things. And things might get a bit uncomfortable'. As an illustration, Emma talked about her parents' ability to purchase 'a really nice instrument' and how she had lent her instruments out to students 'because I felt a little bit guilty that I had all these instruments'. However, her teacher advised her to stop that:

He said that he went through stages when he would say 'Yes' to everything and then realised that he's just been walked over. So that was interesting. But that kind of, that died down more the longer I was there. I think because people kind of stopped seeing the stereotypes and everything. It's quite a natural thing. I mean there was kind of no...I never felt, I never wanted to hide my background or anything. Like it's not something I'm ashamed of, or anything. And there is no reason why you should be [...] My parents are very down to earth. They're very normal people. They've just been quite fortunate, and they've saved and invested a lot [...] So yeah. That was, that was my biggest experience of the class kind of divides.

I have cited Emma's account at length to provide a detailed illustration of how class privilege is disavowed in talk about inequalities. Following a question about personal experiences of inequalities, Emma delves into a long account of how she felt marginalised at music college due to her privileged class background. Though she also refers to feelings of guilt about her expensive instruments, she portrays herself as someone who is teased, stereotyped, and risks being 'walked over'. Indeed, she emphasises that she is not ashamed of her background, and subsequently moves on to underline her parents' normality. Through these statements, Emma constructs herself not only as an outsider to what she perceives as a working-class culture at music college, but also as someone who is marginalised and exposed to unfair treatment. Notably, her 'biggest experience of the class kind of divides' relates to her class privilege, which remains largely unacknowledged in her account. Thus, Emma openly talks about class

inequalities; indeed, she shares her personal experiences. Crucially, however, she does so from a privileged position that remains unchallenged.

### ***Disavowing White Privilege***

Isabelle's response to my question about her 'experiences with the industry in terms of racial diversity and diversity in terms of class and socio-economic background' also involved a disavowal of privilege, in this case white privilege. Isabelle responded by sharing her experience of playing for a majority Black and minority-ethnic ensemble:

There's a weird discrimination where audience members will say to me 'You're the wrong colour for this orchestra and stuff'. And then it's kind of funny. Or maybe I would even make a slight joke about it to my friends or something. But then, after the fifth time of saying 'You are not the right person for this orchestra'. You get a bit, 'Well I can play [the instrument] and that's all that matters. I'm here because I can play, and I respect'...It just gets very annoying [...] Lots of musicians I know think it's really great that [the orchestra] exists and it's promoting that...But they don't rate the quality. And lots of people will say 'Oh, I don't think it's...'. And I even, with having been in it, don't think it's one of the best orchestras I've played with at all. But it's such a happy, such a great feeling. The vibe is, the atmosphere is fantastic. I don't know how to explain that, but it's just kind of, it feels great. And I guess [pause]. There's very few people who aren't white, white British. But in the brass sections especially, I think. Because you don't really tend to have Asian people. But yeah, like with the strings, you have much more diversity. Woodwinds, maybe. But brass, very rare. Normally white guys. So that's kind of interesting. I think it's changing as well but it's quite rare you'd... But I do think that [the orchestra] is brilliant. I don't know whether you could expect it to be like the top...? But if they have people like me going in there, they're obviously not sacrificing...They're not thinking 'Oh we have to have someone who's an ethnic minority just to make it look right'.

I have cited Isabelle's statement at length to highlight four themes that run through her account, and to illustrate the ways in which these themes work together to disavow white privilege. First, Isabelle talks about a 'weird discrimination' where she is told she is 'the wrong colour for this orchestra and stuff'. Isabelle states that 'it's kind of funny' initially, but then expresses her annoyance ('it gets very annoying'). As such, her account downplays the seriousness of racial inequalities and does not focus on the deep sense of anger and pain that Black and ethnic-minority musicians are likely to feel when experiencing racial discrimination. Even though Isabelle is aware that 'there are

very few people who aren't white' in the classical music scene, her sense of annoyance is foregrounded, and whiteness is re-centred through the focus on *her* feelings and experiences.

Secondly, and resonating with frequently made claims that diversity initiatives risk 'sacrificing quality', Isabelle emphasises that she can play her instrument and that this should be all that matters. Indeed, she does not think that 'it's one of the best orchestras I've played with at all', although she later admits that they are 'obviously not sacrificing' quality, given that they hired her as a white person. Notably, the arguments about quality occur at stages in her statement when whiteness is not only made visible, but also problematised. Isabelle emphasises she can play her instrument in response to comments by the audience that she is the 'wrong colour for this orchestra', and comes back to the issue of quality after her acknowledgment of racial inequalities in the classical music profession. Thus, there is no reflection on the privileges associated with being white in a context that normalises whiteness (Bull, 2019).

Thirdly, and resonating with the research participants' positivity in relation to the increased awareness of inequalities that I detected in section one, Isabelle emphasises that playing with the orchestra is 'such a happy, such a great feeling'. While her annoyance is present in the account, Black and minority-ethnic musicians' likely feelings of anger, indignation, or complaint are elided in the foregrounding of positivity. On an affective level, struggles for racial equality are disavowed. Resonating with existing research on white privilege (DiAngelo, 2011: 66), Isabelle's reference to positivity seems to signal a retreat from the discomfort of 'authentic racial engagement'. Fourthly, as I have already shown, Isabelle's statement demonstrates her awareness of ongoing, racial inequalities. When it comes to personal experience, however, Isabelle's feelings of marginalisation as a white person are foregrounded. Similarly to Emma, Isabelle responds to my question about racial and classed exclusions by providing an account of personal experiences of disadvantage. As research has demonstrated, 'there is a great deal of resistance on the part of most advantaged group members to recognising privilege, even when they are willing to admit to privilege's counterpart, disadvantage' (Hastie and Rimmington, 2014: 187). As Emma's and Isabelle's accounts demonstrate, inequality talk, when conducted in a register that fails to acknowledge privilege, can fail to challenge ongoing racialised and classed exclusions.

### ***Discussing Privilege in the Classical Music Field***

It is clear that some research participants were acutely aware of their class or racial privilege. Jessica, for example, reflected on her whiteness, stating that she has 'increased awareness of, all the time, of how much, you know, how much that's privileged me'.



Likewise, Harriet talked at length about inequalities in the classical music profession, acknowledging ‘I am, to some degree, part of the problem. You know, I’m white, middle-class, from an independent school background’. And Suzanne discussed the overrepresentation of white and slim opera singers:

That’s the current problem in the opera world when you go and watch an opera and the entire cast is small and white, like not everyone’s represented. And I know I’m still in a privileged position. I’m still, I’m still, you know. I’m still a white person. I’m still very young. And I’m also not hugely. I’m not like plus size. I can still buy clothes on the High Street. Like, I’m still in a privileged body.

Jessica, Harriet and Suzanne all reference their whiteness and are aware of the privileges it brings. In addition, Harriet reflects on her privileged class background, and Suzanne makes references to her youth and ‘privileged body’. As opposed to Isabelle’s and Emma’s statements, Jessica, Harriet and Suzanne reflect on their positionings to highlight the privileges that whiteness, middle-classness, private schooling, and youth incur.

At the same time, Jessica and Suzanne portrayed the classical music profession as a space that does not encourage recognition of privilege. Jessica talked about a fellow composer who said

things like “And I just was so lucky because one of my friends on Facebook who I’d gone to school with, private boarding school, was now the CEO of a film scoring company and recommended me for a job with Disney”. And I was like “That’s not luck. This is not what luck is. That is circumstance. That is your privilege enacting”. And I just find it really difficult that people can’t acknowledge that. And if she’d said, “I’m completely privileged. I’ve got connections. And I recognise that lots of other people don’t have”, you know, this is luck working for them because it’s structural. You know, fine, like that’s fine, but I just really wish people were more aware of how those factors were working, you know, operating in their lives.

Interestingly, Jessica refers to the trope of luck, which has been shown to be used rhetorically to disavow privilege (Brook et al., 2021; Scharff, 2018). In such cases, luck, and not class privilege, is used to explain big breaks or career success. Jessica is aware of this dynamic and refutes it, calling for the need to interrogate class privilege.

Reflecting on her peers at music college, Suzanne pointed out that we are all white. So I don’t, I just don’t really know how much of an awareness they have [...] I feel like

race is something that's so swept under the rug [...] I just feel that they would not even be switched on to it. I just feel like it wouldn't have crossed their minds to think that it would or could be any different to what it is.

Suzanne's statement captures the normativity of whiteness in classical music education in the UK (Bull, 2019), and expresses a concern that race inequality remains invisible in spaces that are predominantly or even exclusively white. The lack of discussion or awareness of white privilege in these spaces reinstates the normativity of whiteness. As in wider diversity discourses, including debates and initiatives in the cultural and creative industries (Bell and Hartmann, 2007; Mellinger, 2003; Saha, 2018), the normativity of whiteness seems to remain unchallenged. Discussions about racial diversity that take place in a context where whiteness continues to be normalised risk sustaining 'the institutional whiteness of cultural industries' (Saha, 2018: 88). If whiteness remains unseen and unchallenged, white identity continually and silently reconstructs itself as the norm and, as such, over and against 'categories of colour' (Mellinger, 2003: 134). There is thus an urgent need to decentre whiteness and ensure that reflections on white privilege form part of inequality talk. If conducted in a way that fails to make room for the recognition of privilege, inequality talk risks cementing, rather than overcoming, inequalities.

## Conclusion

In line with wider research on the increased awareness of inequalities in the cultural and creative industries, this article has demonstrated that early-career, female musicians are conscious of ongoing hierarchies of power, and openly talk about them in the interviews. This marks an important shift, but one, as my analysis in this article has shown, that requires careful attention. As section one has demonstrated, disapproval of inequalities was presented as common-sensical, which can have a silencing effect. In addition, the research participants' accounts of the increased awareness of inequalities were couched in almost exclusively positive terms, not leaving space to voice anger or discontent. And, as suggested by Banet-Weiser's (2018) notion of 'economies of visibility', there was a risk that inequality talk becomes an end in itself.

As section two has shown, the positive affective register coexisted with a fatalist sentiment, due to a feeling of the impossibility of facilitating structural change. Linked to this fatalist sentiment was a focus on self-transformation, but also a felt lack of agency and acceptance of the status quo. These opening two sections demonstrate that the acknowledgement, detailed discussion, and recognition of inequalities may not pave the way for social change. Indeed, and as section three has argued, a recognition

of privilege is key to overcoming inequalities. However, awareness of privilege was not a consistent feature of the research participants' talk. As some of their accounts suggested, whiteness and middle-classness seem to figure as unexamined norms in classical music spaces. If conversations about 'diversity' take place in these spaces, and if normative positionings – especially whiteness – remain unacknowledged, inequality talk may reinforce, rather than challenge, existing hierarchies of power.

By exploring the discursive effects of inequality talk, the article adds to two bodies of research: first, it provides empirical data that helps us analyse how the turn to diversity in the classical music industry is lived out on the ground. As such, it contributes to wider debates about the benefits and pitfalls of increased awareness of the lack of workforce diversity in the cultural sector. Second, the study contributes to our understanding of how the heightened visibility of feminism has affected young women's sense-making of inequalities at work. Indeed, the article began with an examination of negotiations of gendered power-relations and the focus then shifted to classed and racialised exclusions as well as white privilege in later sections. Further research in this area would benefit from a more intersectional lens that teases out more clearly how gendered, racialised, and classed inequalities work together to affect the lived experiences of classical musicians as well as their negotiations of, and talk about, inequalities. A detailed, intersectional analysis would have exceeded the scope of this article but is crucial to further our understanding of the rhetorical effects of inequality talk.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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