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Turning points in shaping choral conducting practice: six tales of Norwegian conductors' professional development

Dag Jansson^a and Anne Haugland Balsnes^b

^aOslo Business School, Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway; ^bDepartment of Fine Arts, University of Ager, Kristiansand, Norway

ABSTRACT

Based on narratives on six choral conductors' unfolding careers, the article investigates significant moments in professional trajectories – *turning points* – and how these shaped ongoing practices. The empirical material comprises interviews with conductors that represent different pre-conducting platforms – musicologist, music therapist, music educator, instrumentalist, singer, and church musician. Narratives present both an ontological view of experience – lived life is *told* life – and a methodology where the narrative analysis is the researchers' integral retelling of fragments and episodes provided by the informants. The article draws on sensemaking theory to understand how the conductors attend to certain experiences, whether painful or pleasurable, and make their ongoing practice meaningful by modifying course of action as well as identity. A common theme is how they unexpectedly were thrown into the conductor position in their youth. Formal conductor education seems to take a highly ambiguous position in their developments, for some productive – and for some, even disruptive.

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Introduction

The choral conducting practice as we know it today has evolved over the last two centuries and despite the great variety in musical cultures and genres, it is a global phenomenon (Geisler 2010). The key shapers have been conductors themselves, manifested by an extensive tradition of tutorial writing (Adler 1985). An outside view based on research is a more recent tradition and covers an array of topics related to education, competencies, and the professional practice at large (Jansson and Balsnes 2020). The present study looks at the neglected mid-space between conductors' perspective on 'how to do it' and observers' research on 'what does the practice look like': how choral leaders understand their professional development in the interplay between the craft and unfolding careers. Specifically, the study investigates significant moments in professional trajectories – *turning points* – and how these shaped the evolving practices. The empirical basis is interview material from six conductors that were selected from a larger sample, based on thematic richness and expressivity with regard to our topic of inquiry.

CONTACT Dag Jansson  dag.jansson@oslomet.no  Oslo Business School, Oslo Metropolitan University, Pilestredet 35, 0166 Oslo, Norway

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Research tradition

Choral conductors belong to the wider categories of musical and artistic practices, with shared features as well as notable differences. We observe that the majority of research on professional development within musical practices deals with music *teachers*, predominantly with a rather normative orientation – how to *enhance* professional development. Examples include assessment methods (Moore 2009), models for strategic thinking (Jones 2010), and various practical tools for nurturing reflexivity and self-renewal (Brown 2009; Akbarova, Dyganova, and Reva 2017; Wong and Bautista 2017).

A common theme is a critical view on higher music education and to what degree curricula prepares students for real-life working situations. This was raised in a study of the types and content of choral conducting education in Scandinavia (Jansson, Balsnes, and Bygdéus 2018). Durrant (1994, 1998, 2000, 2003), throughout his extensive writing on choral conductor education and development, has insisted on a holistic view on the practice that includes interpersonal skills and an underlying philosophy. Specifically, he has been critical towards partial views on competencies that tend to leave little room for the ‘gestalt conductor’ (Durrant 2003, 65). This view pertains to two of the six elements – the learner and learning outcomes – in Varvarigou and Durrant’s (2011) framework for choral conducting education.

More generally, Bogunovic et al. (2012) pointed at how music education overall neglects the flexibility and innovation that is needed to equip music students with transferable knowledge and skills. Based on analysis of music graduates’ transition from studies to work-life, Creech et al. (2008) called for more emphasis on post-graduate mentoring, multi-genre peer networks, and more varied performance opportunities to facilitate the transition. López-Íñiguez and Bennett (2020) studied how classical musicians reflected on work-life in light of their education by using three coping strategies (the SOC-framework): selection, optimisation, and compensation. Looking at artists more broadly, Hennekam (2017) described how artists manage multiple work-related identities that are potentially incompatible, whenever they combine pure artistic practices with add-on work outside the creative industries. She identified four strategies: integration, accumulation, separation, and disidentification. When failing to retain an exclusively artistic working situation, artists not only need to cope with their own psychological stress but are also compelled to construe a plausible story that allows them to ‘sell’ their mixed practice to others.

The choral conductor role can be seen as a sub-category of musicians where a common feature is the portfolio career – multiple jobs constitute a professional practice. At the same time, choral conducting differs by its explicit leadership function, and at times, it resembles more the music teacher role (Price and Byo 2002). Extant research that addresses the professional practice of choral conductors is rather scarce. Choirs – the context for conductors – have been studied as social practices (Balsnes and Jansson 2015; Bonshor 2014; Geisler and Johansson 2014; Kenny 2016). Bonshor (2016, 2017) has also explored the role of the conductor as a teacher and group facilitator in enhancing singer confidence and inter-singer relationships.

We have in three previous works addressed choral conductor competencies and education with a praxis angle. One of these investigated the importance and mastery of various skills and found that there were notable mismatches between education and work-life demands (Jansson, Elstad, and Døving 2019). The other study looked at conductor development trajectories and found a tight weaving of education and identity (Jansson and Balsnes 2020). However, neither of these studies looked at pivotal moments that were particularly meaningful and thereby changed (or confirmed) the continued path. The third study, applying a mixed methodology for a large survey sample, analysed self-perceptions of an array of competency items as sensemaking activity (Jansson, Elstad, and Døving 2021). However, this study only looked at singular instances of sensemaking as opposed to integral accounts of professional development.

Research questions

We wanted to understand choral conductors' professional development through lived life as told by conductors. In contrast with a more continuous practice view, our curiosity was oriented towards crystallising aspects of lived experience. We asked two questions:

- (1) What kind of events and experiences stand out as pivotal in choral conductors' professional life – including the first exposure to conducting, conductor education as well as ongoing work-life?
- (2) What was the impact on the continued course of careers, both in terms of concrete action and the shaping of identity?

The study is situated in Norway, where choral conducting education serves a mixed professional practice of amateur and professional choirs (Jansson, Balsnes, and Bygdéus 2018). The great majority are amateurs, but there is an emerging professionalisation of the sector, driven by improved state funding (Simonsen 2010).

We based the study on already existing interview material, by applying a narrative approach (Polkinghorne 1995) complemented by theory on sensemaking, that is, how humans create meaning from the multitude of *cues* encountered in lived experience (Weick 1995). What the present study adds to existing research is the specific attention to pivotal situations. The notion of turning points is central in narrative theory (Johansson 2005). Denzin (1989) defines turning points as crises or determinant events in human life where an individual's character is unveiled – epiphanies that separate life before and after. Turning points are disruptive events that involve sudden discoveries of connections. Such disruptions are embedded in Western cultural perceptions of life itself (Johansson 2005) and our assumption was that focusing on such situations would give new insight into the nature of professional turning points, how they arise and what follows.

Theoretical perspectives

Narrative inquiry as a philosophy of science and method has evolved over the last three decades, spurred by the so-called narrative turn (Pinnegar and Gary Daynes 2007). It is a cross-discipline approach that is rooted in phenomenology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, literature, and art (Barrett and Stauffer 2012; Clandinin and Rosiek 2007; Holstein and Gubrium 2012; Reissman 2008; Squire, Andrews, and Tomboukou 2008). Narratives are used in a variety of ways and there is an ongoing academic debate with regard to its possibilities and limitations as an investigative instrument (Stauffer 2014). One issue is whether narratives are given ontological status (told life equals lived life) or are seen as an epistemological approach to understand lived life. For example, Polkinghorne (1995) distinguishes between analysis of narratives and narrative analysis. The former is a traditional thematic analysis of the interview material, while in the latter, the researcher retells the informant's narrative as a coherent tale. We have applied narrative analysis for our study. We have attended to 'how do people make sense of what happened' in contrast to 'what happened?' (Bryman 2004, 582).

In narrative analysis, the researcher provides structure and profile to the informant's tale. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2006, 477), the connection between an experience, the narrative, and meaning is key. The task of the narrative researcher is to collect human experiences as told stories and interpret these in the form of rewritten narratives that expose *the sense* made from the experience. In this study, we have chosen to apply the specific interpretive frame of *organizational sensemaking* (Weick 1995). The theory grew out of the realisation that organisations are highly imperfect constructs and that humans don't depend on accurate information or rationality to function: Humans create enough plausible meaning to act and move on. Sensemaking theory has been used extensively in the social sciences (Brown, Colville, and Pye 2015; Maitlis, and Christianson 2014), and also specifically for how musical ensembles work (Cornelissen, 2006; Humphreys,

Ucbasaran, and Lockett 2012; Weick 1998). Although conductors may be in a lonely position, they are nonetheless participants in communities of practice (Jansson & Balsnes, 2020) and leadership is an integral part of a community (Geilinger et al. 2016). The professional practice of a conductor can therefore be seen as a type of organisation, as it is only meaningful in the context of choirs and peer conductors. While sensemaking is conceptualised as a social phenomenon, it depends on the presence of a sensemaker (Jansson, 2019) and is fundamentally tied to individual identity formation (Brown, Stacey, and Nandhakumar 2008).

Weick (1995) developed seven properties of sensemaking: it is (1) continuously ongoing, (2) social, (3) based on as well as shaping identity, (4) triggered by and involving the selection of cues, (5) retrospective, (6) oriented towards agency, and (7) settles for plausible solutions. We observe that these properties are more operational than Clandinin og Conelly's (2006) four dimensions of narrative analysis: backward/forward and inward/outward. The clearest parallels are how retrospection is a backward look and agency implies looking forward. When we chose to apply the sensemaking framework, we selected the properties (3), (4), (5), (6), and (7) as analytical categories. Although (1) and (2) are at work, we did not attend to them as analytical categories.

We understand the notion of a turning point, as framed in the research question, as property (4) – cues in the sensemaking framework. Cues are particularly strong when new experiences collide with established conceptions. Such collisions have been framed as cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), which is notably also central in the formation of musical meaning (Perlovsky et al. 2013). The strength of a cue is driven by its inevitability and is proportional to the induced cognitive dissonance (Coutinho 2010). When we looked for cues in the interview transcripts, we distinguished between three horizons of retrospection: entry, education, and practice. This led to the following structure for discussing the narratives:

- (a). Retrospective cues as turning points.
 - (a1) Entry experience to choral conducting.
 - (a2) Conductor education.
 - (a3) Conductor practice including continued education
- (b). Making sense of narrated life
 - (b1) Agency.
 - (b2) Identity formation.
 - (b3) Plausibility

Method and materials

The six narratives of the present study are developed from a more comprehensive set of research data, originally comprising a survey of more than 600 choral conductors in Norway, Sweden, and Germany (Jansson, Elstad, and Døving 2019). A subset of twenty conductors in Norway were interviewed in order to investigate variations in professional development with a social learning perspective (Jansson and Balsnes 2020). These interviews took place during the spring of 2018. They were conducted by the authors via video-links and lasted from 30 to 60 minutes and transcribed by two assistants. As both authors are active conductors, the interviews took place as semi-structured peer-conversations, aiming for rich accounts of education and practice throughout the conductors' careers. Additional questions, beyond the original scope and what could be answered via social learning theory, caught our attention. In particular, we observed that some informants told compelling *stories* about their entry into the conductor ranks, experiences during their conductor education, and events in the course of their careers that were significant turning points in their lives.

The open-ended nature of the interviews was well-suited to invoke narratives and we saw that the interview transcriptions could be approached with a narrative lens. Narratives as a scientific

method need not be complete life stories, but can also be episodes, events, and particular themes in an individual's life (Bryman 2004, 582). Adhering to Polkinghorne's (1995) notion of narrative analyses, as opposed to thematic analysis of informants' narratives, we chose to develop narratives based on the transcriptions. The methodology implies that we as researchers retell the informants' stories, by extracting specific event threads and lines of thought that throw light on the research questions.

We selected the informants based on two criteria. First, we wanted six pre-conducting competency platforms to be represented: musicologist, music therapist, instrumentalist, singer, music educator, and church musician. We had previously found that these platforms had life-long impact on conductor careers (Jansson and Balsnes 2020). Second, we chose informants who had provided the most extensive interview material in terms of quantity and expressivity. All six – three male and three female – were active choral conductors leading one or more amateur choirs as part of their working situation.

The narrative analysis was carried out in three steps. First, we drafted a continuous, chronological account for each informant by making use of all relevant elements in the transcribed dialogue. On average, this amounted to around one thousand words per informant. In this step, we as researchers told the integral story in line with Polkinghorne's (1995, p. 19) notion that '[a] narrative configuration is not merely a transcription of the thoughts and actions of the protagonist; it is a means of making sense and showing the significance of them in the context of the denouement'. Our positions as practicing peers come into play as contextual knowledge and a certain level of empathy in recognising pivotal experiences. Next, to stay within the limitations of a journal article, abbreviated narratives that highlight the most significant cues were written. These condensed versions inevitably moved some elements to the foreground and other elements out, what is denoted as 'narrative smoothing' (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 16). Third, the narratives were discussed in light of the categories provided by the chosen sensemaking framework. Cues that spurred observable sensemaking work qualified as turning points in their careers. How the informants *made sense* of them is elaborated in the discussion section. To give an overview of the informant group, some of the key points are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Informant overview. Abbreviated versions of two turning points are highlighted.

Informant	Entry Point	Music Education	Turning point 1	Turning point 2
Thomas	Inspired in high school	Musicology, followed by a master's in conducting.	Nearly gave up during his conductor education but stuck it out	Failed to get conducting jobs, bit the bullet and continued to develop his skills
Anna	Growing up in choirs	Music therapy, followed by conducting courses	Discovered the shared group pulse during her music therapy education	Discovered the strong impact of conducting during a course
Eva	Tipped off about choir in need of conductor by high school teacher	Teacher education, followed by singer education, choral conducting	Pressurised by mismatch with conducting tutor, on the verge of quitting	Realised that generosity and kindness work better in the long run
Johannes	Friends accidentally dragged him into a choir in need of a conductor	Music educator including conducting, followed by singer education	Reduced full time teaching position to make space for more performing music	Disappointed by entirely gestural focus of conducting education at the expense of pedagogy
Cecilie	Conducting as part of music education	Classical singer, followed by pedagogic training, course in choral conducting	Discovered with an open-minded tutor how she could integrate her gestural style with her overall singing skills	Being outside her classical comfort zone as gospel choir conductor, learned gospel style from choir and band members
Martin	Growing up in boys' choir, asked to lead group singing at youth camp	Church music with combined organ playing and conducting	Discovered self-confidence coming from the weight of his education	After a life with choirs realised that conducting is not all there is to life, wary of not overidentifying with it

Research quality in narrative analysis is partially achieved through attention to the process and partially evidenced as communicative validity. Polkinghorne (1995, p. 16–18) outlined seven criteria for judging a life history, which can be headlined as (1) context sensitivity, (2) protagonist embodiment and positioning, (3) role of significant others, (4) protagonist agency, (5) protagonist continuity, (6) temporal boundaries, and (7) plausibility. The role of the discussion is partly to explicitly review some of these. The study adheres to the requirements set by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data with regard to voluntary participation, statement of purpose, informed consent, and anonymity. The informants have been given alias names in this article. In a few instances, we have slightly altered factual data, while retaining the character of the situation, in order to further reduce the possibility of identification.

Highlights of six narratives

Thomas: homecoming trouble

Thomas was initially exposed to choral conducting in high school and was immediately inspired. He did some conducting, first as an assistant during the last year of high school, and then, after high school, as main conductor. After bachelor and master studies in musicology, he went abroad to take a master's degree in conducting. As part of his exam, he was responsible for an opera performance. It challenged him to the degree that he was on the verge of giving up. The day before the concert he seriously considered to quit conducting and do something 'easier', such as astrophysics, as he ironically worded it. Nonetheless, he completed the project, was awarded his degree, returned to Norway, and started to apply for conducting jobs. His perception is that his profile has not been sufficiently valued compared to his domestically educated peers: 'Annoying! I'll just continue to improve and not care about where I have my education from'. Thomas persistently continues to enhance his voice and conducting skills, through practice and by taking master classes and courses.

Anna: growing up in choirs

Anna grew up in choirs as a child and adolescent, alongside dancing, acting, and playing several instruments. She considers that the foundation for her harmonic and aural skills was laid before the age of ten. She thinks about her growing up as a real-life continued education taking place prior to her academic education, which was musicology and music therapy. Her background as a music therapist has made her conscious of how groups function and how a choir relies on a fruitful learning and working environment: 'What's most important is the shared pulse, the experience of community. The shared sound gets to me, when it happens. Be one organism, when the small signals work and we are one'. She conducted choirs for five years in her early twenties but then left it for a long time before picking it up again. At one point, she attended a conducting course that became particularly significant for her: 'It's all about understanding the impact one has. It's about putting up a mirror; what do I evoke from what I signal?' She currently has a varied professional practice, combining music therapy with freelance singing and conducting.

Eva: pressurised by totalitarian tutor

Eva conducting path started in high school. Her ensemble leadership tutor encouraged her to conduct her own choir by tipping her off about a choir in need of a conductor. After high school, she took a music academy education as an instrumentalist. Following her master's degree, she took a one semester-course in choral conducting. Eva felt overwhelmed by a tutor who expected students to sacrifice everything for conducting. She experienced this as too much and never enrolled in any further studies of conducting. Instead, she took organ and voice classes and developed her own conducting practice, initially from a male octet during her studies. Nonetheless, she continued to hold

her tutor in high regard, even sang in his choir for a while, and admits that he may achieve more than she does because he is more demanding: 'I cannot keep going like him. I don't have enough singers to choose from. But I am probably the conductor who will win in the long run because people will put up with me. I know of a lot of people who have been singing in his choir who cannot bear it for long'. Eva considers herself as quite determined but has found a pragmatic balance between her own musical ambitions and the ensemble's needs and interests. She constantly works to improve her relational skills and situational judgement. She has had a job as a church musician for many years but not achieved a tenured position because she lacks the formal qualifications.

Johannes: the teacher who wanted more music in his life

Johannes is a secondary school teacher and a choral conductor. He took choral conducting class in college that was all about beat patterns, rather limited in scope where anything on choral pedagogy was wanting. He considered his movements to be clumsy, and it was the musical sub-disciplines where he received the poorest grade. While in college, his first conducting job came along via some friends who 'accidentally' joined a choir that needed a conductor. Johannes worked for a long time in full position as a secondary school teacher. He felt a growing need for doing more music in his life. Two years ago, he reduced his teaching position to fully concentrate on music one day a week. He believes that his choral conducting competency has come through practice and he works persistently to develop his skills. In addition to conducting various choirs, he has taken several courses as well as being a choral singer himself. A key source of meaning is how he has brought musical joy and sense of mastery to a great many people – 'particularly in one of the choirs, where half the singers are retired people, where the Monday rehearsal for many of them is the big event of the week. It makes me very humble. Creating such good experiences makes me proud'.

Cecilie: classical singer going Gospel – in her own style

Cecilie is educated as a classical singer. During her bachelor programme she also had choral conducting classes. Despite the fact that her tutors were well-renowned and for whom she had great respect, Cecilie felt that their approaches were narrow and constricting, not allowing her to make music freely. She was not able to be herself. However, ensemble leadership practice, as part of the master programme, became a turning point. Here, another tutor provided a better fit with Cecilie: 'She was extremely open-minded and encouraged me to be myself, in fact, to dare to have my own style and emphasise communicating with the choir. Then, finally, I felt secure'. After her studies, Cecilie took over a gospel choir, although she had 'no clue about gospel', as she puts it. However, she picked it up along the way from her singers and from the band and thought it to be great fun. She believes that she has learned 'everything' about conducting through practice: '[I have] developed my own corporeal language as a conductor ... a sort of 'empathetic conducting', where I, in addition to the technical things, ... send via my body and face what I want them to convey to the audience'.

Martin: confident through solid education

Martin was through his childhood and adolescence active in a Christian youth ministry, where the local conductor became his role model. At a youth camp, he was asked to lead a choral singing activity and he thoroughly enjoyed it: 'It fits with what I'm good at – communication. I can easily stand in front of a group, I feel secure in my role'. Later, Martin was educated as a church musician, with equal emphasis on organ playing and conducting. He views his education as very comprehensive and that it gave him a self-confidence that he repeatedly comes back to, not least his exposure to

choir and orchestra. He sees his further development primarily as a question of quantity of experience: '[Experience] is essentially a deepening of everything we picked up during education'. Martin continues to rediscover the value and significance of these learnings. Although education prepared him for a variety of situations, the artistry of the musical moment is something that came with experience. Choral conducting has played a shifting role in Martin's twenty years of professional practice. Although he considers music as an essential feature of life, it is no longer as important as it used to be. He doesn't want to be the kind of conductor who overidentifies with the role and is unable to quit. He wants to be a conductor for others, not that others are choir for him.

Discussion

The value of narratives is neither completeness nor perfect continuity, but how the narrator gives meaning to lived life. When we have undertaken a narrative analysis of six interviews, we have extracted elements that appear particularly impactful as the informants attempt to understand the unfolding of their professional story. When we in the following discuss the narratives via sensemaking theory, it implies that the informants' understanding is not passive registration of what happened to them but a continuously ongoing and active process. The interview situation injected a particular kind of cue that induced yet another round of sensemaking activity, which in turn was brought to the surface as articulated thought. We discuss the narratives by using the structure outlined in the theory section. Each of the two sub-sections addresses the two parts of the research question – the turning points and the coping with them.

Retrospective cues as turning points

Thrown into the role

The narratives are similar in that the conductors were literally thrown into the role by chance. Martin attended a youth camp and was challenged to take charge when the leaders initiated a singing activity. Eva had a conducting teacher in high school who gave her the phone number of a choir that was in need of a conductor – and then she was up and running. Johannes had pals who incidentally strayed into a choir. When he was asked to join as a conductor, he thought it to be a nice experience. Although these events appear rather randomly, they rely on some shared antecedents. In the first place, there needs to be a choral environment – a community of practice where choral singing takes place and singers need leadership. Second, when being exposed to conducting, they had already been participating in some choral activity at school or in a children's or youth choir. People without any choral experience are not likely to be put in front of a choir. The significance of children's and youth choirs for the recruitment into the conductor ranks is confirmed by previous research (Jansson and Balsnes 2020). Third, our informants were *seen*. Someone had noticed that Martin enjoyed being in front of a group and Eva caught the teacher's attention by excelling in class. Although lived life is constituted by weaving of innumerable events, the particular sensation of the first exposure stands out as a turning point and the notion of being thrown into it acquired existential significance.

The ambiguous impact of conductor education

Johannes was disappointed of the conducting class that was part of his music educator training. It was too limited and relational skills were ignored. Cecilie had tutors who were so obsessed with the 'right way' that she felt inhibited, despite her vocal teacher experience and was comfortable leading others. Later, another tutor was able to liberate her and allow her to find her own style. Eva received a solid training by a proficient tutor but was nonetheless pressurised because the tutor demanded more than she was willing to commit to. It made her discontinue conductor training and pursue other studies. Anna has had little regular conducting education but has integrated her music therapy foundation into the group dynamics and leadership of choirs. Thomas is the informant

who is most hungry for more conductor education. He has already completed extensive studies, including conducting, musicology, composition, and pedagogy, and see them all as relevant for his conducting practice. In addition, he reads music history and conducting textbooks in his spare time. Martin is the strongest counter-voice to the disappointed informants. His perception of a rock-solid education as a church musician stands out in all his reflections on his role, his professional practice, and his art. Across the six informants, there is no question that education matters and has a strong impact on how careers evolve. It is, however, highly ambiguous whether the impact comes from positive or negative experiences.

We observe that the extent and quantity of training matters. A basic conducting course can function as a spark by giving a taste for it, but it is limited to build a career on. Content also matters and because pedagogy and leadership largely are wanting in most choral conducting education (Jansson, Balsnes, and Bygdéus 2018; Durrant 1998), other types of programmes may be just as useful, such as practical pedagogy. A poor fit between student and tutor presents serious risk of defection. Conversely, a good fit may be a turning point and revitalise further progress. It seems difficult to pinpoint precisely when learning happens, depending on where the informants are in their lives. Thomas is continuously seeking external input and is in learning mode. Martin underlines the value of his original education; however, he continues to rediscover the significance of what he learnt. For Eva, practice overrules her education.

Evolving practice and continued education

Practice does not necessarily begin after studies are completed. Some have a conducting practice prior to or during academic education. Practice seems to offer both quantity of exposure and a different learning quality than education. For Martin, practice is primarily about depth and quantity of what he established during his formal education. Situational judgement, in particular, is something that requires a long runway. For Cecilie, it was her practice as a professional singer that taught her about group dynamics and ensemble relationships. On this basis, she learnt to conduct a completely new genre together with her gospel ensemble. Also, Anna acquired her own style entirely through conducting practice. Johannes has been eager to also be a choral singer and has actively sought out high-profile conductors. Being able to move freely between choral practice communities (Wenger 1998) seems particularly important.

Various courses and master classes played a part in ongoing conducting practices. Anna tells about a course that became particularly impactful as she discovered a new foundation for her practice. Johannes' most significant learning was in the encounter with a prominent conductor in an elite choir. At the outset, such training should be effective because participants may directly integrate learnings into their practice and have an arena for trial and error. However, shorter courses and master classes have not been found to contribute significantly to self-perceived competency level (Jansson, Elstad, and Døving 2019). This does not rule out that such events may still play a significant role in inspiring participants, confirming or moulding their identities, and nurture peer relationships.

Making sense of narrated life

When an event or experience appears with more salience than others, it is both an initiator of sensemaking work and an object of sensemaking as a result. Cues that stand out compels the individual to act by changing the situation or adjusting identity in order to live with the original situation. Sensemaking theory posits that the problem is rarely fully resolved, moving forward requires the acceptance of less than perfect solutions – it makes good enough sense with a plausible solution. We observe all three elements – agency, identity, and plausibility – in dealing with the career turning points.

Agency

Action may be induced by a specific experience or realisation. When Johannes found that he wanted to give more space for music in his life, he reduced his teacher position to eighty percent. He also

acted concretely on his lack of formal conductor education; he actively sought out other conductors and learning situations, in addition to just working hard. When Eva experienced too much pressure from her first tutor, she chose to discontinue her education. When Cecilie was thrown into a gospel choir, she mobilised all her vocal skills without worrying overly about her lack gestural proficiency – which she developed gradually through practice. When Thomas struggled with getting the jobs he wanted, he worked even harder to enhance an array of skills. He found it difficult, but he didn't give in. Also, during his education, he was thrown outside his comfort zone and thought for a moment of quitting but stuck it out. This situation also illustrates that *no change* is also a manifestation of agency – his ongoing endeavour is confirmed. The various actions exemplify López-Íñiguez and Bennett's (2020) SOC-categories. We observe *selection* as Johannes changed his goal and Eva quit. We observe *optimisation* as Cecilie adapted to the gospel situation and *compensation* as Thomas enhanced his skills.

Failing to get a desired job may induce both concrete action and identity work. It is not possible to remain in the dissonance between seeing oneself as well-educated and not being accepted. To create meaning in such situations unavoidably calls for action, where three main strategies are available (Coutinho 2010): (1) change one of the dissonant elements, for example seek more education, (2) add a cognitive element that fits better with current understanding, for example that own education is generally not valued, and (3) by downgrading one of the dissonating elements, for example by realising that the job was not that attractive after all. However, in this adaptive process, identity is on the move, as when Thomas became increasingly comfortable with going his own way.

Identity formation

An event or experience may challenge to the degree that is too fundamental or too difficult to be handled with unequivocal action. While Thomas continues to develop his competencies, he chooses an identity as an outsider with regard to conductor education. He is compelled to a self-understanding that makes him somewhat different than those inside the domestically educated conductor guild. This is not a question of the substance of the difference; it is about how the outsider identity helps him to accept his professional path.

Cecilie never thought she would become a conductor, which she in fact did, despite the straight-jacket sensation of her education. When she talked about how she had developed her own corporeal language, it was not only a concrete action, she also hesitated to assume a full conductor identity. She stuck to her original singer identity, where conducting sustained the possibility to perform music and was only one means of expression – albeit increasingly important.

Martin's identity, on the other hand, was not on the move to the same degree as he reiterated the strength and significance of his original education as a church musician. In addition to being an organist, his conductor identity was strong and explicit. At the same time, he warned against over-identifying with the role and the attitude that choirs exist for the sake of conductors rather than the other way around.

For Anna, her conductor identity was more subtle; it was more about consciousness and reflexivity with regards to the role's power and impact on the singers. She had therefore developed a high degree of sensitivity for what she brings to the ensemble and how to find the right dosage for her interventions. Her identity as a music therapist shone through; she saw herself as a facilitator for the singer experience. All the six narratives show identities on the move, which concurs with previous research that has found choral activity to be powerful identity drivers (Durrant 2005; Henry 2016; Balsnes and Jansson 2015).

The pressure on identity formation seems less intense for choral conductors than for other artist groups, as indicated by Hennekam's (2017) research. Our hypothesis is that the choral conducting practice offers a wider career portfolio than for most artists without having to go outside the creative sector. In addition, choral conductors may even at the outset have an identity that is not primarily artistic. Conductors' mixed portfolios are therefore more easily socially acceptable and mobilise Hennekam's coping strategies to a lesser degree.

Plausibility

One of the most distinguishing features of sensemaking theory is the notion of plausibility. It means that humans do not need certainty and accurate information to act in a meaningful way. The understanding of a situation or an action only needs to be *good enough* to keep going. In practice, a line of thought or action only needs to be better than the alternative – a pragmatic approach. Anna's restraint and caution with her singers reflects pragmatism. Martin's tale also reflects a well-developed situational judgement, encompassing all the role's dilemmas and trade-offs – without leading to an impasse. He has simply realised that absolute solutions are not fruitful. Such an anti-totalitarian approach was most visibly expressed by Eva, whose experience with a totalitarian tutor lingered. Eva had realised that she was not willing to go as far as her tutor in terms of exerting her artistic will; hence, she was not going to match his achievements. She shunned the pompous and self-serving aspects of the conductor role and admitted that she might be too agreeable. She took a plausible standpoint for her own professional practice – good enough for her values and identity. Accepting that she will not get a tenured position as a church musician is also an expression of plausible pragmatism.

Concluding remarks

The narrative analysis focuses on events and experiences that appear significant for how the conductors' careers evolve. The analysis exposes cues that the informants paid attention to and acted on, thereby suggesting some causal linkages. The noticing of a particular cue is a subjective perception, however, the properties of sensemaking allows a certain structure to emerge. While the individual turning points remain subjective, the pattern is indicative of common themes. The 'thrownness' of the first exposure to conducting is one such theme. The implication for recruitment into the choral conducting profession is clear: students should be given a taste for it at an early stage as a natural expansion of being an ensemble member.

Formal conducting education seems like a double-edged sword. Mismatch between perceived student needs and what's offered and between student and tutor seem like major turning points. We cannot claim any generality in terms of how frequent disruptive experiences are, however, the mere notion that education *can* be negative is a non-trivial finding. One hypothesis is that shorter and more limited curricula present a risk: biased focus on beat patterns and neglect of relational, situational, and pedagogic skills. Even with the limitless variation in professional practices, most turning points reflect an underlying phenomenon: actual work-life collides with aspirations. It happens when the conductor's competencies fall short in the face of demands of the working situation, in the recruitment process or in the face of the ensemble. One implication is that the conductor's reflexivity is key, which would be nurtured by real life praxis during education, mentoring, peer networks, and feedback dialogues with choristers.

On the basis of the identified turning points, we conclude that the sensemaking framework captures well the 'coping triangle' of agency, identity, and plausibility. Every turning point seems to involve specific action and some adjustment of identity, although the blend varies across situations. A turning point rarely solves a problem fully; some friction or dissonance prevails. When the informants nonetheless were able to move on, preferring the chosen approach over available alternatives, the sensemaking property of plausibility was at work.

The sensemaking perspective is less specific with regard to action than López-Íñiguez and Bennett's (2020) framework – comprising the three action categories selection, optimisation, and compensation – and less specific with regard to identity than Hennekam (2017), who distinguished between four identity strategies: integration, accumulation, separation, and dis-identification. The key contribution of the sensemaking perspective, however, is that it combines the objective aspects of agency and the subjective nature of identity. Most importantly, it allows these to unfold without complete resolution – a plausible way forward will do. The sensemaking perspective accommodates the fuzzy nature of meaning making, which somewhat eludes stringent categories.

Even with our small set of narratives, similar mechanisms were observed, which holds some promise of generality. Future research could pursue two different paths, on one hand situate agency and identify formation for specific sub-sectors of the choral conducting practice (such as level, genre, and organisation), and on the other hand theorise the interplay between agency and identity more generally.

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Notes on contributors

Dag Jansson is a professor of arts management at Oslo Business School at Oslo Metropolitan University. He runs the Arts Management Programme, where he also teaches leadership and organisation. His research focus is aesthetic leadership, artistic professional development, and conductor education. He is also an active choral conductor.

Anne Haugland Balsnes is a professor of music and Vice Dean for Research at the University of Agder. She has published extensively on singing in choral, educational, health and religious contexts, as well as on choral conducting education and professional development. She is an active choral conductor.

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