

## “If Girls Don’t Want to Study Jazz, We Can’t Force Them”: an Ethnography of Gender Balance in a Jazz School

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In 2020, I co-authored a study examining female participation in a major Portuguese jazz festival between 2003 and 2018.<sup>1</sup> Our findings revealed a stark gender imbalance: only seven percent of the musicians who performed were women, with no consistent increase over the 15-year period. We also analyzed participation in the festival’s affiliated jazz school competition and found that the cycle of underrepresentation begins early. Female students were not only fewer in number than their male counterparts, but they also participated overwhelmingly as vocalists, whereas male students were primarily instrumentalists. This pattern raised deeper questions about how gendered norms shape jazz education and professional trajectories in Portugal and what cultural and institutional dynamics sustain this imbalance.

As a female jazz musician and educator active in the Portuguese jazz scene, I have long observed how gender subtly and overtly shapes jazz educational contexts. Coming from a classical background, I was surprised to find myself, when I began studying jazz, in a class with only one other female student. This experience, later reinforced during my years as an educator, echoed the arguments of feminist critics who have long contended that structural dynamics within the field of jazz may discourage female students from pursuing it.<sup>2</sup> It has been long discussed how gendered perspectives within music education significantly influence students’ instrument choices, musical style development,

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<sup>1</sup> José Dias & Beatriz Nunes, “Festa do Jazz: A Case Study on Gender (Im)Balance in Portuguese Jazz,” *Jazz Research Journal* 14, no. 2 (2020): 138–159, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jazz.42077>.

<sup>2</sup> Erin L. Wehr, “Understanding the Experiences of Women in Jazz: A Suggested Model,” *International Journal of Music Education* 34, no. 4 (2016): 472–487, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761415619392>; Kelly Gathen, “Gender Bias and Music Education” (Master’s thesis, University of Delaware, 2014); Marlene Kollmayer, Barbara Schober & Christiane Spiel, “Gender Stereotypes in Education: Development, Consequences, and Interventions,” *European Journal of Developmental Psychology* 15, no. 4 (2018): 361–377, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405629.2016.1193483>.

self-perception of ability and career aspirations.<sup>3</sup> Considering the foundational role of music education in the professionalization of musicians, it is critical to reflect on how gender disparities at the educational stage shape and sustain subsequent female underrepresentation in professional contexts. At the same time, it is also important to acknowledge that the underrepresentation of female jazz musicians is not exclusively determined by the lack of female jazz students, but rather shaped by broader power dynamics within the field. These power structures have been long critiqued by feminist scholarship as contributing to gender disparities in jazz, portraying it as a traditionally male-dominated and heteronormative musical culture where masculine values continue to influence the discourses of musicians, critics and educators.

Following the 2010 introduction of tuition free jazz programs at an intermediate level in Portugal, optimists suggested that increased jazz education would naturally attract more female students and gradually expand the number of women playing jazz professionally. However, the ongoing underrepresentation of female jazz students, particularly instrumentalists, remains a reality. Educational institutions often attribute this gender imbalance to a perceived lack of interest among female music students in pursuing jazz as an academic option. While, on one hand, the institutionalization of jazz education may have a significant impact on the emergence of more women as jazz professionals, it is essential to consider the role that jazz education plays in either reproducing or challenging gendered canons rooted in stereotypical narratives and expectations about the values of jazz performance and its traditions.

This article presents an ethnographic field study based on participant observation in a tuition free Portuguese intermediate-level jazz program. It explores how music students' academic choices are influenced not only by individual preferences but also by structural dynamics that significantly shape their musical aspirations and performance behaviors. This study aims to understand how jazz students—the future generation that will play a key role in shaping the development of jazz in Portugal—perceive the current underrepresentation of female students choosing jazz as an academic option. In the first section, I introduce the research setting and methodology, highlighting the gender imbalance among students and faculty and its implications for

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<sup>3</sup> Lucy Green, *Music, Gender, Education* (Cambridge University Press, 1997); Erin L. Wehr, "Playing the Part: A Social-Psychological Perspective on Being a Girl in Jazz," in *The Routledge Companion to Jazz and Gender*, ed. Michael Kahr, James Reddan and Monika Herzig (Routledge, 2022), 143- 155; Gathen, "Gender Bias and Music Education."

students' experiences. The second section reflects on the institutionalization of jazz education as a "serious" and canonized genre, examining the construction of a musical tradition that is deeply tied to values of masculinity, shaping students' behaviors and self-presentation on stage. The third section explores students' perceptions of gender imbalance, focusing on the tension between students viewing women's underrepresentation as a "natural" outcome of individual preferences and considering affirmative policies as artificial interventions. The concluding section identifies key factors contributing to gender disparities, such as gender-coded perceptions of instruments, the late introduction of jazz education in the Portuguese musical curriculum, and entrenched gender norms, emphasizing how traditional imagery and role models perpetuate these inequalities discouraging reflection or institutional changes to address these issues.

#### "THAT WILL BE SO GOOD FOR M. THAT YOU ARE HERE!": ENTERING THE FIELD

I conducted this study in the *Escola Artística do Conservatório de Música de Coimbra*, a public music conservatory located in central Portugal and established in 1986 that primarily specializes in Western classical music education. In 2011, the conservatory expanded its offerings by adding a three-year high school jazz program, named *Curso Profissional de Instrumentista Jazz* (Jazz Instrumentalist Professional Course). The *Curso Profissional de Instrumentista de Jazz* has been a tuition-free music education program integrated into the Portuguese public education system since 2010. Supported by European funding and in alignment with decentralization policies, these programs began to be offered outside major urban centers such as Lisbon and Porto. This educational option complemented the existing offerings at private, independent jazz schools that had been established in the country since the late 1970s.<sup>4</sup> The jazz program at the *Conservatório de Música de Coimbra* was my first choice for fieldwork, not only because it is one of the oldest jazz programs within the Portuguese public education system, but also because it was among the first to be integrated into a conservatory with a long-standing tradition of exclusively teaching Western classical music. Additionally, the *Coimbra* program enjoys widespread recognition among its peers.<sup>5</sup> Its students have achieved notable success, winning

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<sup>4</sup> Pedro Mendes, "Ensinar o Jazz como Forma Musical Característica e Autónoma: a Criação da Escola de Jazz do Hot Clube de Portugal" (Master's thesis, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Other *Cursos Profissionais de Instrumentista de Jazz* are integrated into institutions such as the *Conservatório de Música da Jobra* (the first, established in 2010), the *Escola das Artes da Madeira*, the *Escola de Música do Conservatório Nacional*, and the *Agrupamento de Escolas da Bemposta*.

numerous awards and gaining admission to prestigious undergraduate programs both nationally and internationally.

Between February 2022 and March 2023, I visited the conservatory regularly to observe group classes and individual instrument lessons. In addition to classroom observation, I engaged in informal moments during students' breaks, music rehearsals, and practice sessions. I also had the opportunity to observe jam sessions, masterclasses, recitals, and student concerts organized by the jazz program, which I documented through note-taking and audiovisual recordings. Furthermore, I conducted twenty-one interviews with students from the jazz program, including eight female-identified students and thirteen male-identified students ranging in age from sixteen to eighteen years old.<sup>6</sup> All thirteen male students were instrumentalists, while the instrument distribution among female students included one bass player, one drummer, one guitarist, and five vocalists. I approached the analysis of my data through a reflexive and interpretative lens, with a thematic analysis, identifying recurring patterns and themes that emerged from the students' narratives, my observations, and the cultural and social dynamics of the jazz program.<sup>7</sup> This involved a continuous process of engaging with the material, field notes, audiovisual recordings, and interview transcripts, while acknowledging my own position and the interpretative relationship I hold to the subjects and context of the study. As a female jazz musician and educator, adopting a situated perspective was particularly useful, as it acknowledges the relational and contextual nature of my understanding of the field.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, throughout this article, I discuss gender dynamics regarding codes of masculinity and femininity, which risks narrowing the analysis into a binary perspective. However, what I have observed is that these concepts are constantly being invoked in the contexts of gender conformity or transgression among jazz students. This gender negotiation is rooted in how external gendered expectations, regarding how jazz students should behave or present themselves according to their gender, are experienced through conformity or transgression.

From the very first contact with the jazz program coordinators, my research was met with generosity and interest from my colleagues, who always welcomed

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<sup>6</sup> All students identified within a male/female gender binary.

<sup>7</sup> Jane Singer, "Ethnography," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (2009): 191-198, <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900908600112>; Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich, "Writing the Ethnographic Story: Constructing Narrative Out of Narratives," *Fabula* 59, no. 1-2 (2018): 8-26.

<sup>8</sup> Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575-599, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>.

me as one of their own. I soon became aware that the topic “gender” was often mistaken by the faculty for an exclusive focus on women or girl students. And even though I was interested in female jazz students’ experiences, I was also interested in male students’ perspectives on gender in jazz, as their views may provide valuable insights into how gender dynamics operate in these contexts. Moreover, I was interested in exploring interactions and narratives from all the students within the jazz program to reflect on how gender influenced their relationship with jazz.

I recall a male teacher who received me with excitement in one of my first visits: “That will be so good for M. that you are here!” The teacher told me that M. was a girl, a guitar student in her final year of the program, who had recently asked a female Portuguese singer-songwriter, who had been invited by the jazz program, whether she had faced challenges working in a field where men generally outnumber women. This teacher was very surprised with her student’s question, since M. never gave any clue that she was worried about this issue. I anticipated that probably M. felt safe to broach that subject to another woman, considering that the program had only two female teachers in a group of thirteen faculty members. In other words, female underrepresentation in the jazz program occurred at both the student and faculty levels. Although female teachers in the jazz program were a minority, during the years I conducted my fieldwork, the program was led by a female trombonist.

When I began my research in 2022, the conservatory had 1,005 students, the majority of whom were enrolled in the classical program. With only 35 students, the jazz program represented a clear minority. After observing a lower participation of girls in the jazz program, I wanted to compare that program with the gender distribution in the classical music courses. Among middle school students in the classical program, there were 278 males (50.55%) and 272 females (49.45%). In the classical high school program, overall enrollment was lower, with sixty-four males (51.2%) and sixty-one females (48.8%). In the jazz program, which is an intermediate-level program equivalent to high school, there were thirty-five students, of whom twenty-six were male (74.29%) and nine were female (25.71%).

Music Program	Male students (%)	Female students (%)
Classical (Middle School)	50.55%	49.45%
Classical (High School)	51.2%	48.8%
Jazz (High School)	74.29%	25.71%

Table 1. Gender Distribution of Students in Classical and Jazz Music Programs

While the data shows a balanced representation of female and male students in the classical program, that does not mean that the classical program is free of gender inequalities, particularly regarding instrument choice. Gendered participation in the classical program is notably evident in the singing program, which includes four male students (16%) and twenty-one female students (84%). There was also an evident gender imbalance regarding instrument distribution in the jazz program. All twenty-six male students were instrumentalists (74.29%), whereas only three female students (8.5%) were engaging the program as instrumentalists.

Jazz Program - instrument distribution	Male students (%)	Female students (%)
Instrumentalists	74.29%	8.5%
Vocalists	0%	17.14%

Table 2. Instrument and Vocal Role Distribution by Gender in the Jazz Program

The *Curso Profissional de Instrumentista Jazz* only becomes accessible at the high school level, meaning there is an absence of jazz education opportunities for younger students in middle school. Nevertheless, it is meaningful to compare the gender distribution of students between classical and jazz programs at the high school level. This comparison reveals a more balanced gender representation within the classical music program, highlighting a notable gender disparity in jazz. These results reflect some ideas that were also reinforced during the interviews, specifically the notion that certain instruments and musical practices are perceived by students as being more feminine or masculine. For example, singing is often perceived as a more feminine activity, leading to greater participation among female students than male students. Although these

gendered perceptions and stereotypes around instrument choice have long been studied, it was significant to see these narratives still being reproduced.<sup>9</sup>

#### THE ROLE OF TRADITION IN GENDERED PERSPECTIVES ON JAZZ EDUCATION

Music education contexts provide a valuable framework for exploring authenticity, transmission, canonization and tradition.<sup>10</sup> Scholarship has particularly noted that classical music education and conservatories place a high value on the Western art music tradition.<sup>11</sup> Given this, it is critical to consider how the institutionalization of jazz education had to negotiate both its identity and legitimacy when entering pre-existing educational institutions. The first sites of jazz institutionalization in the U.S. after World War II deployed narratives positioning jazz as “serious” music, marking a shift from its previous status as an underground or subcultural genre.<sup>12</sup> As Dale Chapman notes, “the institutionalization of a music genre is, above all else, the formalization of a narrative about the genre, and of the value system that the narrative embodies.”<sup>13</sup> In this context, it is essential to examine how jazz education contributed to the legitimization of jazz as part of a broader musical tradition, supporting its transformation into a “serious” music, one that could be canonized, systematized and formally taught. According to Kenneth Prouty, jazz’s legitimacy has, to some extent, may have relied on a narrative around its tradition.<sup>14</sup> The tradition of jazz was constructed by critics and musicians through historical narratives about the racial struggle of African Americans, as well as through a perspective of the U.S. as a Western leader promoting a certain vision of peace and

<sup>9</sup> Gina Wych, “Gender and Instrument Associations, Stereotypes, and Stratification: A Literature Review,” *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education* 30, no. 2 (2012): 22-31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/8755123312437049>.

<sup>10</sup> Bruno Nettle, “Music Education and Ethnomusicology: A (Usually) Harmonious Relationship,” *Min-Ad: Israel Studies in Musicology Online* 8, no. 1 (2010): 1-9; Henry Kingsbury, *Music, Talent and Performance: a Conservatory Cultural System* (Temple University Press, 1988); Patricia Campbell, “Ethnomusicology and Music Education: Crossroads For Knowing Music, Education, and Culture,” *Research Studies in Music Education* 21, no. 1 (2003): 16-30, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103X030210010201>.

<sup>11</sup> Bruno Nettle, *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music* (University of Illinois Press, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Prouty, “The History of Jazz Education: A Critical Reassessment,” *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education* 26, no. 2 (2010): 79-100, <https://doi.org/10.1177/153660061203300204>.

<sup>13</sup> Dale Chapman, “The Institutionalization of Jazz,” in *Jazz and American Culture*, ed. Michael Borshuk (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 173.

<sup>14</sup> Prouty, “The History of Jazz Education: A Critical Reassessment.”

democracy.<sup>15</sup> This perception of jazz as a music of resistance, drew an analogy between music and society in which jazz represents a free society that is present in much of the literature.<sup>16</sup> However, little attention has been paid in mainstream discourses to how the construction of jazz tradition, and especially jazz education itself, has been shaped by deeply gendered and sexualized narratives that value masculinity and heteronormativity, thereby creating their own discriminatory structures. As Mario Dunkel notes, “The idea that there is something inherently masculine about jazz has proven to be significantly persistent and continues to shape jazz discourses in the 21st century.”<sup>17</sup> In many ways, the dominant narrative of freedom and empowerment associated with jazz has made it more difficult to critically engage with the underlying subtexts of masculinity embedded in what remains a predominantly male and heteronormative musical space. In light of this, it becomes essential to examine how such narratives continue to inform jazz education, as they significantly influence students’ perceptions of the genre and shape the pedagogical approaches adopted by educators. These gendered perspectives persist in shaping students’ ideas of what constitutes an authentic jazz performance, positioning male and female students differently in relation to these gendered conventions.

These historical paradigms seem to also impact how students depict men and women in jazz, as well as in shaping how they should behave and present themselves in performances. In one conversation about a big band class, M., a female vocal student, told me:

The guys were asking, “Ah, so what are we supposed to wear?” And he (the teacher) said, “It can be this, this, or whatever,” and then he said to me, “Oh, you’re the singer, instead of pants you can wear a skirt, if you want”... but it was cool, If I had said, “I also prefer to wear pants, I don’t want to look too extravagant,” he would have been fine with that too. But since this happened in history, the female singers were more... extravagant.

The teacher’s comment may reflect the persistence of gender norms that continue to shape musical performance and identity. In jazz, as in many other musical genres, these gendered conventions are not just a matter of style but a performance of social roles, deeply embedded in the history and tradition of the

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<sup>15</sup> Mario Dunkel, *The Stories of Jazz: Narrating a Musical Tradition* (Hollitzer Wissenschaftsverlag, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Jennifer Ryan, *Post-Jazz Poetics: A Social History* (Springer, 2010); Ingrid Monson, “Oh Freedom: George Russell, John Coltrane, and Modal Jazz,” *Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*, ed. B. Nettl and M. Russell (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 149-168.

<sup>17</sup> Dunkel, *The Stories of Jazz: Narrating a Musical Tradition*, 8.

genre. Although M. was reinforcing the individuality of her choice, the underlying message of her teacher reinforces the stereotype that female performers are expected to meet a higher standard of visual spectacle. This echoes a long-standing tradition in jazz, and performance more broadly, where female musicians, particularly vocalists, have been compelled to embody femininity through their outward appearance. It implies that in order to fit into the established gender roles, women are encouraged, if not outright expected, to conform to a more overtly feminine appearance on stage.

The expressive codes of jazz authenticity also apply to male students. I was particularly curious about the underlying motivations behind R.'s clothing choices for his recital. This saxophone student presented himself very formally, wearing a buttoned-up white shirt, a vest, a tie, and a fedora. When asked about his outfit, he stated that he: "wanted to look sharp! I wanted to look really good.... I imagined all that context, that old-fashioned context, like Dexter Gordon and all, the style they used in their gigs." R.'s statement reveals a significant engagement with the visual and performative codes that have long been associated with jazz, particularly within the context of Black masculinity. The idea of looking "sharp" is not merely about personal appearance but speaks to a broader cultural and historical narrative about how Black men, especially jazz musicians in the early 20th century, may have used fashion as a means of asserting their identity, challenging primitivist stereotypes, and claiming legitimacy in a genre that was historically racialized.<sup>18</sup> For Black musicians, cultivating an image of sharpness, through style, performance and conduct, may have become one way of elevating jazz and claiming its place in the cultural mainstream. The student's desire to embody this "sharp" aesthetic seems to be tied to a certain idea of jazz tradition, which underscores the present emphasis on Black masculinity in the construction of jazz identity. Nevertheless, the program was predominantly attended by white students, pointing to how imbalanced dynamics within Portuguese jazz education intersect not only along gender lines, but also along racial ones, shaping who is represented within these contexts.

#### STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT GENDER IMBALANCE IN JAZZ

Considering the lack of female participation within the jazz program, I wanted to further explore how students perceive the existence of gender disparities both within their jazz program and in jazz more broadly. I asked jazz students how

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<sup>18</sup> Monica Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Duke University Press, 2009).

they saw the role of women in jazz. From the several topics that emerged, I highlight issues of female underrepresentation and gender stereotypes related to musical roles.

Like, what is the role of women in jazz? Well, I think... I've always thought there are fewer women in jazz. There are fewer women in jazz, I don't know why, but when there are these women, they are usually singers. (T., male bass student)

On several occasions, it seemed that this was the first time students, and especially male students, had reflected on the gender disparity within their program or in jazz more broadly. Often, after becoming conscious of this discrepancy during our conversations, they would respond with remarks like "I've never thought of it," "I don't know why," or "Why is that so?" This lack of awareness, especially among male students, may be understood not simply as individual oversight, but as a reflection of their position within a patriarchal system that renders such imbalances less visible to those who benefit from them. On the other hand, girls seemed obviously aware they were a minority in a male-dominated environment. They showed several levels of consciousness and strategies to navigate it:

You see yourself there, surrounded by boys... I wasn't very used to it. I was more used to being with girls, that's what I was more accustomed to. Suddenly, only boys, and it was just me and I. who were girls. Suddenly, I was there, a bit like... now, who am I going to hang out with? (M.S. female voice student)

Experiences of isolation or discomfort for being a minority are very commonly reported by girls studying jazz.<sup>19</sup> M.S. shared some sense of alienation, recognizing the lack of representation and its impact on their experience.

There was also the perspective of A., a female bass student, who shared a sense of higher responsibility and awareness regarding gender representation as an instrumentalist:

We are the only female instrumentalists in the course. There are the singers, but... I think it's more responsibility for us because, well, I think the better we are, the more other women who see us might see that as a reference. (A., female bass player)

As a newcomer in the jazz program, A. mentioned that sometimes she felt judged and perceived as less capable, potentially due to her gender or

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<sup>19</sup> Erin L. Wehr, "Playing the Part: A Social-Psychological Perspective on Being a Girl in Jazz."

inexperience, saying that she feels she “have to prove more.” At the same time she feels that she is equally treated by the faculty as her male peers:

Well, because I’m a woman and a bassist, I think that if I’m going to play, if I’m going to do a concert, people will look and think, “Wow, a female bassist.” So, there’s more pressure. But what I like about this program is that it doesn’t matter if I’m a woman; if I do something wrong, people will criticize me regardless of whether I’m a woman or not. (A., female bass player)

But other perspectives from female students emerged regarding the underrepresentation of women in the program:

So, I was like the only girl. And when I found out, I was kind of like... I mean, I wasn’t sad or happy, it was just like OK. But it was a strange thing because in my previous regular classes, there were thirty people, lots of boys and lots of girls, you know? But well, the boys also... like, I don’t know, there are people who discriminate a lot... I don’t know, maybe some girls feel uncomfortable being surrounded by so many boys, but the truth is that boys and girls are the same. Like, I didn’t feel much of a difference. (M. female voice student)

In this statement, it seems that M. negotiates her initial sense of strangeness by quickly dismissing it, asserting that “boys and girls are the same.” M. positioned herself in a way that minimized gender distinctions by reinforcing the idea of equality between boys and girls, choosing not to focus on gender at all. Ultimately, each student’s response shows different strategies for coping with being a minority, and they may reflect the different dynamics they encountered within the jazz community and how they felt integrated.

While students who had previously been in classical music programs were more aware of this difference, as they had experienced a more balanced gender representation in their classical education experience, they nonetheless acknowledged that instrumental practice in the classical program was also gendered, as I understood through a conversation I had with both S. and A. together. One of the female students noted that, “there were many more women in classical music!,” while the other added:

Even instrumentalists! But there’s also something to consider... girls tend to gravitate a lot, I think, towards the flute. I don’t want to say they all go for the same thing, but they tend to choose that area in music, like piano, classical acoustic guitar, and singing, of course. But, for example, drums and bass are more commonly seen with boys.

Students tended to associate the practice of certain instruments with either men or women, largely based on their experiences of seeing those instruments played by certain genders. Their perceptions were mainly shaped by the representations of teachers, peers, and music history that they had observed. For her part, M., a female voice student, noted that, “the most common thing to see is boys playing guitar, boys playing bass, boys playing drums, it has a lot to do with history,” and J., a male bass student shared:

If someone says to me: “imagine a jazz quartet,” I might think of more men than women. But I don’t think that’s negative; I don’t think it’s due to something internal... like... I don’t think it’s something that’s difficult to change. It’s just the image.

Through these conversations, it became clearer how deeply the historical representation and imagery shaped students’ perceptions about the role of men and women in jazz. M. and J’s statements emphasize how the visual representation of men in these musical roles has become the norm. At the same time, students seemed unlikely to question this gender imbalance, as they tended to naturalize the absence of women by attributing it to the belief that women have historically not participated in the development of jazz or played a leading role. As Eric Teichman stresses, there is an ongoing perception within jazz education that there were no relevant female instrumentalists and that women played a subsidiary role in shaping jazz history.<sup>20</sup> This historical discrimination seems to remain unchallenged in most jazz mainstream educational contexts. I asked T., a male bass student, why he thought we did not see as many women as men in jazz, and his answer was succinct: “Because there weren’t, there weren’t that many women.”

Students explained the absence of women as a result of historical gender discrimination and the status of women’s rights during the key eras of jazz tradition, often adding that “things are better now.” Considering that the social situation of women improved across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and that female students currently appeared to pursue classical music studies more equally, I wanted to understand how they perceived the remaining lack of female students choosing jazz as an academic option. The contribution from J., a male guitar student, was particularly insightful:

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<sup>20</sup> Eric Teichman, “Pedagogy of Discrimination: Instrumental Jazz Education,” *Music Education Research* 22 no. 2 (2020): 201–213, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2020.1737925>.

I also think there are a lot of people in classical music simply because... most people usually start studying it at an early age, right? But for someone who chooses jazz... the chances of having a structured jazz education at such an early age are very low or even nonexistent, right?

J. emphasizes that there are probably more girls in classical music education because they often start studying it as children, likely due to a decision made by their parents. Since these public jazz programs are only available at the high school level, this raises the question of whether gender conformity becomes stronger by the teenage years, making it less likely for a teenage girl to choose to study a musical genre or instrument that may seem to transgress norms of femininity. J. goes on, evaluating students' backgrounds before studying jazz, as well as their motivation to choose the program:

In my class, there are a lot of people like me who came from rock. And there are very few girls that I see playing rock guitar or drums or bass... like, there are some, obviously. But sometimes I look around and think... the majority are all men, just guys playing rock, and then... "OK, I'll go to jazz because there aren't many other options," and that's very much the case... because if we really look at my class, there are people who came from classical, some who came from rock, some who didn't have any practice in music, others who already had some background in jazz, so each case is different.

Many students agreed that they were studying jazz because that was the only option to have a formal structured musical education beyond classical music. These students would rather study rock or pop, if that option was available, but they also acknowledged that jazz would offer a strong foundation in terms of performance and compositional skills that they could use within other musical genres. According to J., the fact that many students in the program came from other male-dominated musical genres, such as rock, could also explain the absence of female colleagues.

In conversations with female students, I asked how they would perceive the introduction of policies aimed at encouraging more girls to study jazz. M.S., who had previously shared experiences of discomfort for being a minority in the program, expressed a favorable perspective towards affirmative policies aimed at increasing female participation in the jazz program to promote greater diversity: "I think it should be encouraged, also to have more variety." M.S. also emphasized the role of parents who discourage female students from pursuing jazz, or even music studies in general, steering them toward other career opportunities that seem more reliable and stable. A., a female bass student, also

believed that it would be beneficial to have not only more women enrolled in the program, but also more access to female instrumentalists role models.

Not every female student approved of such policy changes. In these cases, students believed that the motivation to study music, an instrument, or a musical style was driven solely by personal and individual choices, as can be seen in the following statements:

I don't think that would make much of a difference. It was my decision to come and study music, to learn music. I think I was born with a passion for music. It was truly born within me. (I., female drum student)

I think that in an ideal society, there wouldn't be... forcing people to be anything. It's more a matter of not imposing anything on the person, and they end up doing what they naturally want (S. female guitar student)

According to I. and S.'s perspectives, incentives for girls studying jazz may be perceived as an imposition, interfering with the natural course of individual choice. In other words, if the current structure of gender participation is primarily male, the students might argue that it reflects a "natural" outcome of individual preference, and any attempt to change this might be seen as disrupting the freedom to choose freely, as seen in M.'s remark, "I think that if no girl *wants* to study jazz, that is ok."

These latter perspectives reflect a strong sense of individualism and personal agency in musical choices, ultimately locating the causes of underrepresentation in the choices made by underrepresented individuals themselves. From this point of view, implementing measures to encourage more diverse musical choices or greater female participation in jazz education is perceived as forcing an artificial reality, rather than addressing systemic inequalities.

## CONCLUSIONS

The gender disparity observed in the jazz program at the *Conservatório de Música de Coimbra*, particularly regarding the underrepresentation of female students in instrumental roles, reflects the well-established notion that certain instruments and musical practices are culturally coded as masculine or feminine. However, it seems that both students and institutions reproduce these dynamics without questioning or challenging them.

The absence of jazz education at the middle school level may be an important factor in the lower female participation in the jazz program at the high school level. Since female music students often begin classical music studies at an early age, they are more likely to continue with these studies into their teenage years.

In Portugal, access to specialized music education is largely limited to music conservatories, which typically begin accepting students around the age of ten. These institutions follow a competitive admission process, often requiring previous musical training. Outside of this specialized framework, music education within the general public school system is limited in both scope and duration. Public schools offer mandatory music instruction for only two academic years, usually between the ages of ten and twelve. These classes are generally constrained by a strict national curriculum that emphasizes theoretical knowledge, basic music notation, and the practice of the recorder. Choral singing or instrumental performance is not systematically integrated into the general curriculum. Public, tuition-free jazz education in Portugal is institutionalized only at the high school level. This delay may discourage girls from choosing jazz, as by their teenage years, they may have already internalized gender norms or lack the support from their families to pursue jazz as a viable option.

Overall, the gender disparity within the jazz program at the *Conservatório de Música de Coimbra* reflects broader societal and cultural constructs surrounding gender roles in music. The traditional imagery of jazz as a male-dominated field continues to shape perceptions, perpetuating the underrepresentation of women in instrumental roles. Moreover, the implementation of positive measures promoting gender balance is not consensually accepted among students, as some perceived such initiatives as being imposed or forced.

To address this imbalance, it is essential to consider both the societal narratives that influence students' choices and family support, as well as the potential benefits of earlier, more inclusive jazz education programs that challenge these stereotypes and create a more equitable environment for future generations of musicians.

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