

# ‘Musical Reflections’: An experience with public engagement

Giulia Lorenzi

Institute of Advanced Study, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

Correspondence: [giulia.lorenzi.1@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:giulia.lorenzi.1@warwick.ac.uk)

Twitter/X: [@GiuliaLorenzi92](https://twitter.com/GiuliaLorenzi92)

ORCID: [0000-0002-5943-7931](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5943-7931)

**Funding:** Early Career Research Fellowship, Institute of Advanced Study, Warwick

**Editorial review:** This article has been subject to an editorial review process.



**Copyright notice:** This article is issued under the terms of the **Creative Commons Attribution License**, which permits use and redistribution of the work provided that the original author and source are credited.

You must give appropriate credit (author attribution), provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

---

## Abstract

*In this short piece, I reflect on my experience in organising and convening a public engagement event after submitting my PhD Thesis. I explain how my initial motivations to put together a seminar series on the philosophy of music were centred on the idea of distributing the finding of my doctoral work. Yet, I conclude showing how the two-way relationship with a small, motivated and enthusiastic audience ended up being the inspiration for further research.*

**Keywords:** public engagement; philosophy of music; philosophy; collaborations

---

## **Introduction**

After submitting my PhD Thesis in philosophy at the end of September 2023, in collaboration with Warwick Arts and Music Centre, I organised and convened 'Musical Reflections: A Seminar Series on the Philosophy of Music'. The series was grounded in my doctoral work, which analyses the perception of music from a philosophical perspective and was intended to simply disseminate my findings. Surprisingly, the event presented unexpected positive outcomes which I am going to reflect on in this piece. I hope this could contribute to enlarging the perspective on the reasons for which public engagement should be conducted.

Public engagement has recently gained increasing attention at both universities and governmental level (UKRI, 2023). Reasons that can motivate researchers to deliver public engagement activities and initiatives can vary. Scholars may aim at informing the public in order to spread awareness about a certain issue (Redfern et al., 2020), influence people's behaviours (Kang, 2014, Stofer et al., 2019), produce social changes (Stewart et al., 2016), solve global problems (Kumpu, 2022) or just inform the population. Yet, public engagement should also be a two-way relationship (UKRI, 2021) and benefit researchers and their research as well. In this piece, I explain how, my experience with public engagement, was initially guided by the intention of distributing the outcomes of my PhD thesis and ended up being a place of inspiration for further research, in line with UKRI document on the benefit for researchers of public engagement (UKRI, 2020).

## **Expectations and the Starting Point**

The intention of creating a public engagement event emerged some months before the expected day of submission of my thesis. At that stage, over spring 2023, I had started applying for jobs. Reflecting on my PhD experience I came to two main realisations. The first considered the impact of the pandemic on my PhD research. Towards the end, when we were 'going back to normal', I realised how the circumstances in which my doctoral studies had taken place limited or prevented collaborations with theatres, musical venues, musicians, and other musical professionals. Yet, in hindsight, the interdisciplinary nature of my work would not just enable the possibility of collaboration with such external partners and individuals with different expertise but would benefit from the interaction with them. Furthermore, the opportunity to engage with an audience not trained specifically in musical studies and yet interested in music from a different perspective could also add depth and nuance to my research. The philosophical perspective from which my work is conducted, indeed, naturally embeds and requires the consideration of different viewpoints

and theories, to which I had more limited access than in other circumstances.

A second important realisation for me at that stage concerned the isolation in which research takes place and can, unfortunately, risk to stay. Writing a thesis is *per se* an isolating experience. It becomes even more so in the writing up stage when all of a sudden, a series of ideas finally link together in a (hopefully) organic unity and the author is under pressure in presenting them in their best version with limited time available. The result is that, not just the writing is done in isolation, but also that the findings remain isolated until further actions are taken to distribute them. I felt that I had spent a great deal of time researching people's experience of music that could potentially be of interest for different communities (e.g., musicians, musical industries, other philosophers, etc.,) for different reasons (e.g., understanding their audience, understanding music as form of art and auditory perception overall, etc.,) and that was just sitting on my laptop inaccessible, for different reasons, to most people around me.

I then included the idea of a public engagement event to be held in collaboration with the Warwick Arts Centre in my application to the IAS Early Career Fellowship scheme, which I later won. Motivated by the idea of building collaborations and distributing my research, I started planning a seminar series mostly aiming at giving a chance to the members of the public to engage with philosophical discussions on music. Thinking about the audience, on the one hand, I wanted to share and discuss some of the ideas I worked on during my PhD. On the other, I wanted to engage people showing up at the event giving them a chance to understand what it means to do philosophy and think about music at the same time. With clear aims about distributing my research and giving people a chance to try out philosophy in mind, I began to plan the series.

I initially considered which research questions and topics in the contemporary debate in philosophy of music could be both engaging and made accessible for the general public. A debate on the metaphysical nature of the occurrences of musical pieces, for example, which is intended to study the metaphysical nature of musical scores and performances, and their relationship, seemed very abstract and less connected to people's everyday life experiences of music. Thus, I decided to leave it to the side. Instead, I thought asking what music is, which sounded like a very broad and possibly intimidating question, may however be intriguing and easily relatable to people's personal experiences of music in their everyday experiences. With this type of reasoning in mind, I ended up selecting five topics and structuring the series as a fortnight event. It was at this point in my thinking and planning

stage that I was informed that my application for the IAS<sup>i</sup> Early Career Fellowship scheme was successful.

At this stage of preparation and aware of the support of IAS, I then reached out to Chris Mapp, Head of Music at Warwick Music Centre, to present him my ideas. In a conversation about how to make this event happen, we figured out practicalities such as finding a place to host the meetings and selecting a day and time in the week that could make the sessions accessible to as many people as possible. Once decisions on those aspects of the event were confirmed, I wrote a few lines of a quick, catchy presentation for the series which appeared in informative materials which I was helped in distributing by Warwick Arts Centre. A webpage was set up and an original picture was provided by Warwick Arts Centre which supported me in publicising the event both online, on their website, and in print, in their Winter flyer. With the intention of reaching more people and potentially some interested students based in departments other than mine, I also opened a Facebook page and an Instagram account where I posted a few days in advance of each meeting and added some more information regarding the research question which was going to be explored next.

At the end of the first phase of planning, I expected a series of five meetings exploring five, self-standing, main research questions on the philosophy of music. I imagined that the event could attract a small audience of generally interested participants with a variety of expertise and backgrounds. I booked the room where I held the event for a couple of hours every time thinking that that would be enough and that, more realistically, I was going to have sessions of a maximum length of about an hour/an hour and half at best. I thought, indeed, that I was going to leave some space in the sessions for interactions and discussions with participants. Yet, I also considered that participants could be intimidated in sharing their views and so unwilling to do so even if interested in the topics.

### **The Planning of Sessions**

I have always considered philosophy more as a practice than a discipline. Therefore, in putting together a plan for each of the meetings of the series, I was set since the beginning to create a seminar-like space for discussions and exchange of ideas. I did not want to just get into the room and lecture someone on the literature that I have been reading over the past several years. I wanted to give my participants a space where they could have a taste of what it means to do philosophy and think philosophically about music. I wanted them to have a go at using their own experiences with music and reflecting on them under a different light.

However, I could not expect my participants to have any clue about philosophical methods and practices. Furthermore, I could not expect them to show up at each meeting and remember what was discussed the previous time. I hoped some of the participants would come back and attend multiple sessions over the term, but that, clearly, could not be the base on which I planned the content and format of the meetings.

The challenge I was facing then was twofold. I wanted my participants to be active parts of our meetings where they could share intuitions and views and build their philosophical take. Yet, I also needed to provide enough information and guidance for them to be able to engage with philosophical issues employing their philosophical skills.

I ended up organising the schedule of my sessions splitting them into two different moments: an initial seminar-like moment and a follow-up lecture-like moment. This format can sound counterintuitive since it asks participants to cover an active role in the meeting at the very start when they did not receive information about the philosophical literature yet. How could I expect them to try to reply to research questions and engage with philosophical issues when they had not yet had the chance to familiarise themselves with what has been already written?

What I really wanted to avoid with this move was to ‘normalise’ their thinking. Often when we discover a new idea, we are drawn to read our reality through the lens that those new concepts that we acquired gave us. However, in doing so, we lose part of our autonomy and freedom of thoughts in the process. So, I designed each session starting from a broad research question and asking participants to reply to it in written form on a handout. I generally gave them about ten minutes to write something and I hoped to spend about the same amount of time to discuss the replies. In this way, I could collect their initial intuitions and thoughts about the question/topic at hand without risking derailing their thinking or lead them to some standardised replies already produced by the philosophical community.

I also thought that this type of starting point could engage participants more than an opening of the sessions which immediately provided information about theories put forward in the specialist literature. I hoped that facing questions first could build a sense of expectation to discover what the philosophical answers provided by professionals were just at the end. The initial questions I picked for each session were, indeed, broad, and challenging. Presented with a complex initial philosophical puzzle, the participants could try out what philosophers do on a daily basis, namely coming up with possible solutions. Yet, they were left on their own reflecting on the issue at hand for at least some minutes embracing the struggle of facing a complex challenge which did not have an obvious and

broadly accepted reply. I hoped that this could prompt people to want to know more.

Going from a minimally structured initial moment of basically a brainstorm on a certain issue, I then planned to move on to a more structured moment where I would give some examples from the literature and asked participants organised in small groups to gather some ideas on them formulating either supporting thoughts or criticisms. I selected and put on a different handout a small series of short quotations from relevant papers and books. I split people into small groups and assigned each group one of the quotations. In selecting which quotations went to each group, I generally planned to assign the philosophical quotation closer to people's intuitions on the basis of the previous task. I thought that making people see that their very own ideas had some sort of 'official' philosophical version could encourage them to think that philosophy is not something destined to just some of us, but a human practice that is inherently interesting for everyone. In other words, I hoped that philosophy and philosophical practice and ideas could sound relatable.

After discussing what the groups thought about the short portion of text assigned to them, I planned to finally explain how the philosophical debate is structured around the question I picked for each session. I planned to link back to people initial thoughts what the main voices in the debates on philosophy of music wrote on the topic of the session making sure that the points made could sound accessible also for non-academics. I hoped that planning the session this way would make my participants think that philosophy is something for them and is something in which they could be engaged and interested in pursuing further. I also wanted to explain where in the debate the authors of the quotations distributed were located. I hoped to clarify how relevant and influential the voices of the philosophers that we were reading were in the context of the academic debates on music. This indeed would have avoided leaving uncertainty regarding the relevance and interests of some of the major works in the field. I hoped that this could provide the idea that the corpus of writing in philosophy of music is rich and varied, yet organic and structured, while still open to welcome further ideas.

Even with this plan in place, I thought that five meetings with the same structure could end up being perceived as boring by those participants who may have liked to attend the entire series. So, I planned to organise two invited talks for the third and fifth session. I thought that this could have allowed me to include in the series two sessions on topics I was not conducting research on giving my participants a broader perspective on philosophy of music. For this reason, I intended to invite a guest speaker who could talk about the relationship between music and emotions – a

topic of great interest in philosophy of music. I also thought about inviting a guest speaker whose research engages with a philosophical tradition different from the one I generally work on. This could give participants the chance of exploring the work of German thinkers rather than just Anglo-American philosophers on which I generally focus on.

The kind availability of Maria Zanela, PhD student in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Warwick, and of Professor Andrew Huddleston, Professor of Philosophy in the same department, made both these sessions happen. Alternance of different topics, and also philosophical traditions and presentations' styles, I think, was one of the strengths of the series which has been more successful than what I could initially predict.

### **The Outcomes**

Even if the number of participants matched the expectations and did not pass the eleven people per session, other, not quantitative outcomes turned out to be much more positive than expected. The strategy of starting the session with a question which could prompt personal intuitions and reflections worked very well. So much so that rather than the ten minutes allocated for discussing the personal thoughts written on the handouts, participants often spent at least double the time to share their ideas, and question, ponder on and challenge other people's positions. The discussion was lively and enthusiastic. The small break that I imaged to take between the first two interactive seminar-like moments and the lecture-like part of the session was often spent in other informal chats about musical genres, musical pieces and songs of interest, further readings in musicology, psychology or other close fields of investigation on music.

For the entire length of the series, participants really took their opportunity to discuss their ideas, get involved in the philosophical challenge and try out their thoughts. Several returned after the first meeting they had participated in and a couple of people even showed up for each session. Many stopped me by at the end of our sessions to ask suggestions for further reading or to propose a case of a piece that they found puzzling or an idea that they had come across and wanted to know what I (and in some cases even other participants) thought about it. Booking the room for two hours proved to be the right move since we definitely used the space up to the last minute.

The participants' enthusiasm in the initial stage of our meetings was contagious and inspiring. Once I submitted my PhD thesis (Lorenzi 2023), the prolonged fatigue and stress associated to the completion of such a long piece of work made me largely forget the joy that I initially had when

I got into the programme, and I started my research. My small enthusiastic audience allowed me to see my research with the fresh eyes of someone deeply passionate about music and who did not have the chance for whatever reason to spend the same time researching on it. Even with all the difficulties that a PhD path implies and the sense of exhaustion that I experienced after submitting my thesis, my public engagement activity was a chance for me to feel grateful again for having had the opportunity to undertake this path and carry out my philosophical research on music.

The quality of the discussions in the sessions was also remarkable. Participants took the initial broad questions and the tasks of close reading of philosophical texts that I presented very seriously. They were actively trying to understand each other in the initial open discussion, asking genuine questions to other people with the intention of understanding others' positions more deeply. Some thoughts were already so spelled out that they matched some theories in the literature very closely, to the point that some participants felt seen when we looked at the philosophical texts. In the reading tasks, they truly tried to make sense of each term employed. They pondered and valued each word, as it should be done, to make sense of the author's message. I personally felt as if I was facilitating the work of one of the best seminar groups I have ever encountered in my teaching practice.

With such an active and involved audience, over the sessions, I was able to gather inspiration for further developing my research. I noticed, for example, that the exchange of ideas often circled back to a point that I had briefly considered in my own work. The recurrence these ideas and the interest demonstrated by the audience in them made me believe that they could be a fruitful place to start further research. Further investigation in the literature demonstrated that the experience that the audience was reporting is common and relatable among listeners of any musical tradition and genre. Yet, despite being popular among listeners, it has been generally overlooked by the philosophical literature which has never dedicated space and thoughts to it. These considerations led me to turn to the initially rough idea that came up during the discussion of the seminar-like moment of my event into one of the two main questions that I am now developing into postdoctoral projects.

It was in the occasion of noticing the recurrent ideas brought about by participants in the event that I realised that the interactions with my audience were providing me concrete, workable inputs that I could develop into future investigations in the field. I started putting together the series thinking that I was going to provide and offer something to the audience. Happily, I ended up realising that it was in the exchange that I got the most out from the event. The dissemination of my ideas became a



mere basis to receive feedback, inputs and inspiration. I was building something new and not just taking my research out of my laptop and my office.

## **Conclusion**

In this piece, I explained how I organised and convened a public engagement activity based on my PhD thesis. I reflected on the intentions that initially motivated me to build collaborations with non-academic venues and professionals and disseminate my research. I showed that the most unexpected outcomes were actually the most valuable for me. I explained how the interactions with the audience in the seminar series made me feel motivated again towards my research in a phase in which I was experiencing a great sense of fatigue after my PhD submission. I also reported how, thanks to the exchange of ideas with the participants, I ended up receiving concrete inputs to develop my research at a postdoctoral level.

---

Dr Giulia Lorenzi is an Associate Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Study at the University of Warwick. She previously was an Early Career Research Fellow in the same Institute and a Teaching Assistant in the Department of Philosophy at Warwick. Influenced by her musical practice as a horn player, Giulia's PhD research concerned the development of a philosophical account of the perception of music. She works at the intersection of philosophy of mind, perception, action, and music. For her teaching practice, she won the Warwick Award for Teaching Excellence in 2023 in the category 'postgraduates who teach'.



---

## **References**

Kang, M. "Understanding Public Engagement: Conceptualizing and Measuring its Influence on Supportive Behavioral Intentions" *Journal of Public Relations Research* 2014, Pages 399-416.

Kumpu, V., "What is Public Engagement and How Does it Help to Address Climate Change? A Review of Climate Communication Research" *Environmental Communication*, Vol 16, Issue 3.

Lorenzi, G., "On the distinctiveness of listening to music" *PhD Thesis* Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/LOROTD> [Accessed: 26 September 2024].

Redfern, J., Bowater, L., Coulthwaite, L., Verran, J., “Raising awareness of antimicrobial resistance among the general public in the UK: the role of public engagement activities “ *JAC-Antimicrobial Resistance*, Volume 2, Issue 1, March 2020, dlaa012, DOI: [10.1093/jacamr/dlaa012](https://doi.org/10.1093/jacamr/dlaa012) [Accessed: 16 January 2024].

Stofer, K.A., Ludgren, L., Dunckel, B.A., James, V., Lange, M., Krieger, J., “Public Engagement on Climate and Health in Museums and Participatory Dialogues may Foster Behavior Change” *Journal of STEM Outreach*, Vol. 2, Issue 1.

Stewart, K., Dubow, T., Van Stolk, C., “Social change and public engagement with policy and evidence” RAND corporation, Santa Monica, Calif, Cambridge 2016.

UKRI, 2020. *What’s in it for me? The benefits of public engagement for researchers*. Available at: <https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/UKRI-16102020-Benefits-of-public-engagement.pdf> , [Accessed: 17 January 2024].

UKRI, 2021. *Public Engagement Guidance*. Available at: <https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/EPSRC-110821-PublicEngagementGuidance.pdf> [Accessed: 17 January 2024].

UKRI, 2023. *Our public engagement strategy*. Available at: <https://www.ukri.org/what-we-do/public-engagement/our-strategy/> [Accessed: 17 January 2024].

---

**To cite this article:**

Lorenzi, G., 2024. ‘Musical Reflections’: An experience with public engagement. *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 12(1), 17-26. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v12i1.1522>.

---

**Endnotes**

<sup>i</sup> University of Warwick’s Institute of Advanced Study, see [https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross\\_fac/ias/](https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/ias/) .