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Article

Student perceptions of their music education in Cyprus Music Schools: Future directions

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Abstract

This study explores students' perceptions, attitudes, and suggestions regarding music education in Cyprus Music Schools, highlighting the cultural context of their learning and the future directions they envision. As student voice becomes increasingly crucial in shaping curricula, understanding how students experience their musical studies is essential for designing relevant and meaningful educational practices. Qualitative data were collected through open-ended questionnaires from 128 upper-secondary students across the five Cyprus Music Schools. Thematic analysis showed that students highly value performance-based and collaborative subjects, such as individual lessons, ensembles, and concerts, which they see as central to their musical and personal growth. Experiences connected to Cyprus's musical heritage, including Byzantine and traditional music, received mixed responses, suggesting a need to better integrate cultural content with students' current interests. Students also expressed clear ideas for shaping the future of music education, including broader instrumental and genre options, more creative subjects, and greater inclusion of contemporary musical practices. These suggestions reflect a desire for a curriculum that both respects Cyprus's cultural identity and supports students' evolving musical aspirations. The findings offer guidance for culturally responsive and future-oriented curriculum development in Cyprus Music Schools, underscoring the importance of incorporating student perspectives into educational decision-making.

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Music schools; students' perceptions; student voice; curriculum implementation; music education in Cyprus

Introduction

Student voice has become increasingly important in educational discussions over the last few decades, with students' perspectives playing a central role in current academic research and practice. Student voice refers to engaging with students, genuinely listening to their thoughts, and consulting and collaborating with them to create educational experiences that meet their needs and aspirations (Cook-Sather, 2020; Fielding, 2012). Student voice can take various forms, from simple consultation to active co-creation of the learning process, and the degree of influence students have may vary depending on institutional openness and power dynamics.

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Research in music education has repeatedly revealed that traditional music curricula are criticised for their limited flexibility, over-reliance on Western classical music, and lack of relevance to student interests (e.g., Buchborn et al., 2021; Economidou Stavrou & Papageorgi, 2021, 2022; Karlsen & Westerlund, 2015; Ross, 1995). Studies also indicate that students prefer hands-on, practical experiences, such as learning to play modern instruments, participating in ensembles/ bands, creating music with friends, and using music technology, over theoretical or historically focused subjects that seem disconnected from their daily lives (Economidou Stavrou & Papageorgi, 2021; Griffin, 2010; Hallam et al., 2018). Tuovinen (2024) emphasises that the lack of student input in shaping educational policies is a significant problem in publicly funded music schools worldwide, reflecting a broader trend of top-down policymaking that excludes children and youth from important decision-making processes (Barrett, 2017; Bennett et al., 2019). In music education, policy and practice are often predetermined rather than collaboratively constructed with students (Barrett, 2017). This dynamic limits their capacity for students to discuss, co-decide about, and influence their own learning. Moreover, this is evident even in educational systems with strong democratic traditions, such as Finland's, where policymaking still remains largely hierarchical (Tuovinen, 2024). Recognising students as curriculum co-negotiators rather than passive participants reframes music education as a shared process of meaning-making and democratic participation. Renshaw (2024) adds another dimension, arguing that collaboration and creativity must become catalysts for reimagining education and building communities of empathy, belonging, and shared responsibility. This emphasis on valuing the young people's voice situates the current research within a broader movement toward socially responsive, participatory, and collaborative music education across Europe.

The current study aimed to explore the attitudes, perceptions, and suggestions of 128 students at music upper secondary schools (lyceums) in Cyprus regarding their music education and to identify areas for improvement based on their perspectives, interests, and future aspirations. Specifically, this article highlights the most and least valued music subjects in the Cyprus Music School curriculum, as well as the most and least meaningful musical experiences, and offers recommendations for enhancing and developing the curriculum. Qualitative research methods are employed to gather insights from students, offering a comprehensive understanding of their educational experiences and aspirations for music education in Cyprus Music Schools. This analysis will inform recommendations for policymakers, providing options to consider during future curriculum revisions that align with students' needs and desires.

Context of the Study

Music schools in Cyprus are a distinctive part of the country's educational and cultural landscape, supporting young students with musical potential and providing opportunities for both musical growth and general academic development. Over the years, they have become vital institutions for nurturing musical potential, safeguarding cultural heritage, and preparing students for careers in the music industry. The first music school opened in Nicosia in 2006, introducing an innovative model in upper secondary education (Lyceum, grades 10-12) that combined comprehensive music instruction, including instrumental and vocal training, with academic studies. Over the following decade, the programme expanded to include lower secondary schools (Gymnasium, grades 7-9). It was also established in the other

four cities on the island, with one music school in each to ensure accessibility across the island. Music schools aim to nurture young musicians' talents while providing a well-rounded education. Since their inception, music schools in Cyprus have maintained a dual focus: promoting excellence in music and equipping students with the academic foundation needed to pursue various study and career paths in music and beyond. The success of these schools has led to their steady growth and growing reputation as centres of cultural and educational excellence.

Music Schools in Cyprus, as already mentioned, offer a six-year program that combines intensive musical training with general education (Glinias, 2023). Students, along with general secondary school students, take traditional academic classes, including mathematics, sciences, languages, and physical education, and, in addition, specialised music classes. This structure ensures that students develop holistically, gaining both practical and theoretical knowledge needed for success in their fields. The development of the Music School Curriculum considered curricular structures from other countries and was designed to adequately prepare students who wish to pursue musical studies worldwide (Kyriaki Neophytou, 2023). The music curriculum is comprehensive, covering individual instrumental or vocal lessons, small ensembles, ear training, music theory, harmony, and choir. Students can choose their primary instrument and receive one-on-one instruction from qualified instrumental or vocal teachers, among the best musicians on the island, selected through a highly competitive process. Students also take courses in traditional Cypriot and Byzantine music to become familiar with the cultural heritage of Greece and Cyprus. The curriculum is complemented by modern topics, such as music technology, which provide students with relevant skills for contemporary music production. The program's balance of one-on-one instruction, ensemble participation, and cultural education aims to introduce students to a range of career opportunities within and beyond the music field.

Admission to Cyprus's music schools is competitive in most cities and relies on a selection process designed to identify students' musical potential. Primary school graduates interested in joining a music gymnasium are evaluated mainly on musical aptitude, including simple rhythmic and melodic pattern recognition, singing melodies, echoing rhythms, and, where students have prior experience, musical performance, playing a musical instrument, or singing. Experience with an instrument is not required, ensuring that potential is prioritised over musical skills. Each music school in every city admits up to 25 students per year in grade 7, and grants full scholarships to attend music schools through grade 12. Once enrolled, students complete their secondary education within the music school system, graduating with both a high school diploma (apolytirion) and a specialised music diploma.

Music schools in Cyprus have become a vital part of the island's cultural identity. They play a key role in nurturing young musicians in Western classical, traditional, or jazz music. Regular participation in concerts, festivals, and competitions allows students to display their talents and enhance their musical skills. These events also serve as platforms for cultural exchange, fostering a sense of community and artistic collaboration. Notable activities include annual choir workshops and concerts, collaborations with the Cyprus Symphony Orchestra, and performances at international venues such as the Musikverein in Vienna. Such experiences expose students to diverse musical styles and audiences, enriching their education and broadening their perspectives. The music schools' commitment to excellence is further shown through partnerships with renowned musicians, cultural organisations, and educational institutions both locally and internationally. These collaborations improve teaching quality and offer students opportunities to connect with the global music community.

The current study investigates Cypriot music school students' attitudes, perceptions, and suggestions regarding their music education, centred on the following three questions:

1. Which music subjects do students find most and least helpful in their music education?
2. Which musical experiences do they find most and least impactful?
3. What suggestions do they have, if any, for improving and enriching the curriculum and their extracurricular experiences in music schools?

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design using open-ended questionnaire responses to explore students' perceptions, attitudes, and suggestions regarding their music education in Cyprus Music Schools. A qualitative approach was chosen to enable students to express their experiences freely and in depth, without being restricted by predetermined response categories. This aligns with contemporary frameworks on student voice and participatory educational research (Cook-Sather, 2020; Fielding, 2012).

A total of 128 upper-secondary students from the five Cyprus Music Schools (Nicosia, Limassol, Larnaca, Paphos, and Famagusta) participated in the study (Figure 1). All students enrolled in Music Lyceums during the 2021–2022 academic year were invited to participate through a purposive convenience sampling strategy, which ensured broad representation of the student population while prioritising accessibility. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. According to enrolment records from the Ministry of Education, the total population of upper-secondary students attending Cyprus Music Schools during the 2021–2022 academic year was 228, so the sample of 128 participants represents 56.1% of the entire student body. The participants' gender is shown in Figure 2. They also varied in years of study (Figure 3), ranging from those who had attended music schools for four years to those who had nearly completed six years at the time of the survey.

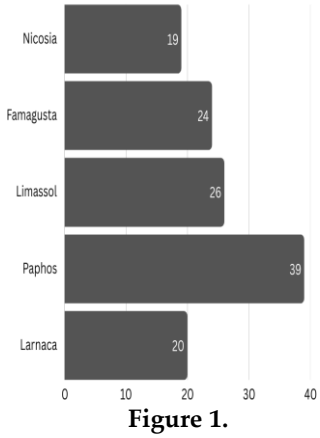

Figure 1.

Distribution by City

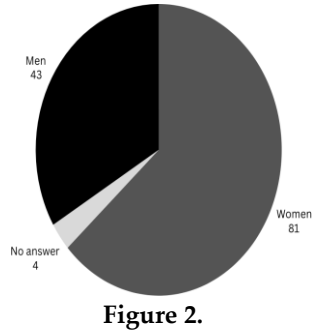

Figure 2.

Gender Distribution

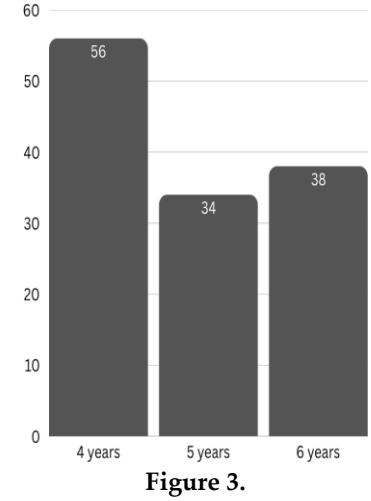

Figure 3.

Years of study in Music Schools

The questionnaire consisted of six open-ended questions focusing on students' perceptions of the music curriculum, specifically their most and least valued music subjects, their most and least significant musical experiences, and their suggestions for improving and enriching their experiences at the Music School. The questionnaire was developed by the research team in alignment with theoretical frameworks on student voice and curriculum evaluation, as well as literature on music schools, with a focus on published work from Greece and Cyprus, where the term "music schools" refers to the same educational context. To establish content validity, two experts in music education and qualitative methodology reviewed the initial questions for clarity, relevance, and alignment with research aims. Minor amendments were made to the wording before distribution. A small pilot test involving four students from the Nicosia Music Lyceum, not included in the final sample, was conducted to assess clarity and interpretability. Students confirmed that the questions were understandable and encouraged detailed responses; therefore, no substantial revisions were required after the pilot phase.

Data collection took place in May 2022. Paper questionnaires were distributed to students during school hours and completed on-site. A total of 128 valid questionnaires were returned. Each questionnaire was assigned a number from 1 to 128, and responses for each question were transferred verbatim into a spreadsheet, with each question placed in its own column for systematic analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involved familiarisation with the data through repeated reading, generating initial codes, searching for candidate themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final narrative report. To strengthen the analysis's credibility, two members of the research team independently coded 20 questionnaires. Their coding was then compared, and any differences were discussed until a shared understanding of the coding framework was reached. After this process, one member continued coding the remaining questionnaires using the agreed-upon approach. Although qualitative interpretation guided the analysis, quantification of codes (counting the frequency of each theme) was used as a supplementary technique to illustrate response patterns and support thematic interpretation. This numerical component does not imply statistical generalisation but rather highlights the relative prominence of ideas across the dataset.

Results

The study's findings revealed insights into what students valued most, what they considered less important, and their suggestions for curriculum improvements. By analysing their responses, this section offers a detailed look at their preferences, perceptions, and goals.

Most Important Music Subjects

In the open-ended question 'What are, for you, the most important (useful/interesting) music subjects you have attended at the Music School,' students had to recall their courses over their years of study in music school and write their answer. All 128 students answered, and their responses, when coded, gave us the following music subjects, summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Most valued music subjects among Cyprus Music School students

Subjects	Responses
Individual Instrument/Instruments	95
Musical Ensembles	86
Music Technology	45
Choir	42
Music Theory/Harmony & Aural Training	37
Traditional Music	21
Byzantine Music	20
Orchestra/Band	12
Music Analysis	10
Musical Theatre	4

Students overwhelmingly prioritised practical, performance-based subjects in their responses. Individual instrument lessons stood out as the most highly valued, with 95 responses highlighting their importance. These lessons were described as transformative, helping students improve their technical skills and deepen their connection with music under the guidance of their instructors. Many students emphasised the importance of the strong teacher-student relationship that was built through these lessons. As one student expressed, "The most important subject for me (...) was (...) the individual instrument classes. (...)The joy I get from playing my instrument, combined with a supportive teacher, is what every student needs." Student 4. Another student remarked, "Individual lessons are the most important ones because they allow for quick progress thanks to the excellent teachers (...)." Student 10.

Music ensembles were also regarded as essential, with 86 students highlighting them as a key part of their education. Ensembles received praise for encouraging collaboration, teamwork, and performance skills, while also providing opportunities to explore diverse repertoires. Students valued the balance between individual practice and group performance, which helped them learn how to synchronise with others and work together effectively. Along with these core practical subjects, music technology received significant attention, with 45 responses underscoring its importance. This subject was considered especially valuable for its role in modern music production and its ability to prepare students for current music careers. "I believe that the most important subject I took was music technology because it prepares the student for the ever-growing field of electronic music (...)" Student 19 indicated.

The choir, mentioned 42 times, was another notable subject, valued for its emphasis on vocal skills and group dynamics. However, responses about the choir were mixed. While some students praised it for offering opportunities to collaborate and develop vocal techniques, others found its repertoire and teaching approach less engaging. "(...) In addition, choir lessons are important because they teach us cooperation, obedience to a conductor, and the importance of teamwork. Besides, we learn much musical knowledge and cultivate some musical skills." Student 10

Other subjects, such as theory, harmony, and aural training (37 responses), traditional music (21 responses), and Byzantine music (20 responses), were also acknowledged for their roles in students' musical education, as it is evident, looking at the data, that they were among the most important courses for some of the participants.

Most Significant Musical Experiences

What are the most important (useful/enjoyable) musical experiences you have had at the Music School throughout your years of study? This was the second open-ended question asked in the questionnaire, to which 126 out of 128 students responded.

Students emphasised the importance of hands-on, real-world experiences in their musical education, with concerts being the most significant. A total of 109 students identified concerts as the most impactful part of their learning. These performances provided opportunities to showcase skills, build confidence, and experience personal growth through public recognition of their efforts. In their own words, "the most important musical experiences were the various concerts I participated in, where I learned to manage anxiety and perform in front of large audiences." Student 5.

Choir events were frequently mentioned among the responses, with 77 students recognising them as necessary experiences for a musician. These events were appreciated for their collaborative nature, as they enabled students to work together as a unified group and work toward a shared goal.

> The Choir's meeting! It was an unforgettable experience for all of us because we were all from the same music schools and spent the day together, allowing us to spend quality time with our classmates. We also got to see other Music Schools, learn how they work, and what they do, which was really exciting. (Student 10)

Another student emphasised the opportunities to sing together with popular Greek singers: "Through the Music School, I have gained a great deal of experience; we have sung with renowned artists such as Makedonas, Ntalaras, and Savvopoulos. We have even participated in the Cypriots' concert at the Musikverein and the concert with Basilio." (Student 81)

The trip to Vienna was another outstanding experience, with 33 students calling it a highlight of their education in music schools. The opportunity to visit one of the world's most renowned musical cities, experience its rich classical music heritage, and perform in prestigious venues provided students with valuable cultural insights and inspiration. "Our trip to Vienna was one of the most interesting musical experiences. We were even more focused and worked even harder, driven by a desire for something we wanted. (...)" Student 126 admitted.

Other notable experiences included ensembles (21), trips and excursions for rehearsals (16 responses), collaboration with other music schools (10 responses), competitions/exams (7

responses), and recordings (6 responses). Although less frequently mentioned, these experiences were found to contribute to students' overall musical development. Table 2 summarises the most significant experiences as identified by students:

Table 2. Most significant musical experiences reported by students

Suggestions	Responses	Suggestions	Responses
Concerts	109	Recordings	6
Choirs meeting	77	Christmas Carols	5
Vienna trip	33	Lectures/ Workshops	5
Ensembles	21	Hymns in church	4
Trips/excursions for rehearsals	16	Paphos 2017	4
Collaboration with other Music Schools	10	TV Appearance	2
Competitions/Exams	7		

These findings highlight the importance of experiences that allow students to apply their learning in real-world settings, such as through live performances, collaborative events, or cultural exchanges.

Least Important Music Subjects

The third question, 'What were, for you, the least important (not useful/not interesting) Music Subjects you have attended at the Music School, throughout your years of study?' was exploring students' opinions on the subjects in their music education at Music Schools that they did not find very important. A total of 121 students responded to this specific question. While most students expressed satisfaction with their curriculum, some subjects were identified by students as less valuable or relevant to their personal goals and interests. Table 3 summarises those subjects that students found least important.

Byzantine music, mentioned by 33 students, was frequently described as one of the least important subjects for them. Many students found it challenging to connect with the historical and theoretical aspects of the subject, particularly if their interests lay in contemporary or Western classical music. Traditional music received similar feedback, with 24 students citing it as one of the least relevant subjects to their aspirations. Although some appreciated its role in preserving Cypriot heritage, others felt it did not align with their musical preferences or career ambitions. Some of their responses are presented below: "(...) In terms of usefulness, Byzantine music did not serve us anywhere, unlike traditional music, which we found in later years through other subjects." Student 10. Another student stated:

> I think that all the lessons I have been taught have their special meaning. However, perhaps the music analysis lesson could have been taught more engagingly and cohesively, rather than in a fragmented way. It would be better if the different historical periods were taught together with pieces that the students analyse. (Student 47)

Table 3. The least valued music subjects among Cyprus Music School students

Subjects	Responses
Byzantine Music	33
Choir	29
Traditional Music	24
"There is no less important lesson"	24
Music Technology	20
Music Analysis	10
Musical Ensembles	9
Music Theory/Harmony & Acoustics	8
Piano	8
Musical Theatre	3

Choir was also mentioned as a less important subject by 29 students, despite its very positive reception by others. Using their own words: "The choir and more specifically the last 2 years because of the content and songs we were taught and invited to learn." (Student 22). The mixed responses suggest that the value of the choir may depend on factors such as repertoire, the personality and the teaching style of the choir director, and students' interests. Another student had a different perspective, focusing on the teacher more than the subject itself:

> The choir is unimportant to me because I feel that I do not like the teacher's attitude. Because he is overly strict, I am afraid to talk to him, and also, I am afraid that if I make a mistake in a piece, we might have imperfections. (Student 57)

Some students also expressed dissatisfaction with music technology (20 responses), indicating that the subject did not meet their expectations, possibly because of its focus or the way it was taught. However, this feedback was less common compared to the appreciation expressed for the subject of music technology in other questions.

Least Important Experiences

What are the least important musical experiences you had at the Music School throughout your years of study? This question investigated what students value least in their musical experiences, with 104 of 128 students sharing their perspectives, summarised in Table 4.

Table 4. Least significant musical experiences identified by students

Experiences	Responses
"None"/"All are important experiences"	52
Concerts/Performances	23
Exams	14
Concert with Margarita Zormpala	4
Choir	2
Rehearsals	2

Students' responses about their least important musical experiences at the Music School show a range of viewpoints. Some students said that every experience holds value, while others pointed out parts they considered less significant. Several students rejected the idea that any experience is "less important," instead emphasising the learning value in all situations. Student 10 echoes this view, saying: "I think no experience was less important than the others because every experience has something to teach you." This indicates that, for some students, all aspects of their musical education in music schools, whether performance- or academic-related, were meaningful for their personal and artistic growth.

Another key theme is the frustration caused by disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic. Student 4 states: "There is no less important experience for me. However, it is sad that so many concerts, so many performances have been cancelled because of an invisible enemy with the now well-known name 'Covid-19'." This response highlights the emotional and educational loss students faced due to event cancellations, indicating that some saw these disruptions as unfortunate rather than dismissing their importance.

For some students, exams were perceived as the least valuable part of their musical education. Student 41 explicitly states: "I think the least important experiences are the exams because they are stressful." This perspective reflects the tension between assessment and personal development. While exams serve as a structured way to measure progress, they may not always align with students' learning preferences or artistic growth.

A different perspective comes from Student 126, who criticises the scheduling of individual instrument concerts: "The concerts of individual instruments. I agree that it is nice to present our work to an audience. However, many of these concerts were scheduled on dates when we had numerous exams and were busy studying for them."

This highlights a conflict between academic workload and performance obligations. While concerts are generally considered an essential part of a musician's education, some students found their scheduling inconvenient or even counterproductive when it conflicted with exam periods. These insights suggest that while students value performances and learning opportunities, there may be room for improving the balance between academic assessments, concert requirements, and student well-being.

Suggestions for Curriculum Enrichment

The final question asked students to share their suggestions for improving the music school's curriculum. The question was formulated as follows:

What do you wish to be taught or would have liked to be taught in Music School that is not in the curriculum? In other words, if someone gave you the chance to add or remove something from the Music School curriculum, what would it be? (121/128 responded to the question)

Students expressed a strong desire for a more comprehensive and dynamic music education, emphasising the need for greater diversity in the instruments offered, the inclusion of modern ensemble opportunities, expanded theoretical knowledge, and a curriculum open to a wider variety of musical traditions. Their responses highlight a call for both modernisation and structural improvements in how music is taught at the Music Schools in Cyprus. The limited selection of instruments at the Music School was a significant restriction (for example, no jazz voice or bass is offered), many students felt, hindering their ability to explore different styles and improve their technical skills within the current curriculum. Student 22 expressed this frustration: "The students should have the opportunity to be able to play any instrument they wanted, not just the ones we have at school." Many students also underlined the need for ensembles that include contemporary genres, arguing that the curriculum still focuses too much on Western classical or traditional music. Student 8 emphasised this point: "(...) I would add more ensembles because there are not enough; the options are minimal. There is no ensemble about rock music or pop, I think it is necessary." This response suggests that students value an education that remains relevant to current musical trends, allowing them to explore styles that align with their interests. Expanding ensemble options beyond classical music would help students build practical skills in different genres, making them more adaptable musicians. Student 10 advocated for student-led ensembles to encourage both creativity and independence in musical collaboration:

> Also, something that would be nice would be to be able to create our own small ensembles (2-5 people) with different or the same instruments playing a certain type of music, so that we can have concerts that can participate in music ensembles (e.g., pop ensemble, blues ensemble, rock ensemble, etc.) (Student 10)

This proposal demonstrates a desire for greater independence in musical expression, enabling students to experiment with various styles, collaborate with peers, and perform in settings that better align with their musical preferences and aspirations. Another significant gap in the curriculum identified by students was the lack of comprehensive training in composition and orchestration. Although proficiency in instruments and vocals remains a primary goal, many students expressed frustration over the limited opportunities to develop their skills as composers. Student 37 highlighted the disconnect between practical ability and theoretical knowledge:

> It would be nice to increase the (music) theory a little bit, because since I have been playing an instrument for 10 years, and I am at a high level, I play things that I do not know how to write or sometimes I do not know what something is called. (Student 37)

This comment shows that this specific student recognises the value of music theory but feels their education has not fully prepared them to understand or use it effectively. Another primary concern among students was the structure and scheduling of music lessons, particularly regarding the balance between general education subjects and specialised music instruction. Many students argued that music-related subjects should be given greater priority in their academic schedules. Student 20 suggested:

> (...) The ministry should offer more periods for teaching our music lessons (theory, harmony) during morning school hours; we are taught subjects such as math or history, whose teaching hours, if reduced to at least two per week, would be more than enough. (Student 20)

Another recurring issue was the inconsistency in instrumental and vocal instruction, as students expressed concerns about the frequent changes in their teachers. This reflects the negative effect of unstable mentorship on their progress. Student 43 highlighted the challenge this creates: "(...) Instrumental teachers should not change often because students build relationships with them, and when a new teacher comes in, it becomes more difficult for students, forcing them to start over." A consistent learning relationship with a teacher is crucial for long-term growth, and frequent changes disrupt the continuity of their training.

Several students also emphasised the importance of including leadership and performance skills in the curriculum. Student 47 pointed out a key gap in professional preparation: "Perhaps it would be good for students to have a subject in choir and orchestra conducting. Also important is cultivating comfort in exposition and public speaking, which the music school should teach its students. (...)" This response highlights a neglected aspect of music education: educating students not only as performers but also as leaders, conductors, and communicators. Adding courses in conducting, stage presence, and managing performance anxiety would better prepare students for professional music careers, equipping them with the confidence and skills necessary to lead ensembles or engage audiences effectively.

Suggestions for Enrichment of Musical Activities

What other additional musical experiences would you like to have had during your studies at the music school? What musical activities would you suggest be included? (117/128 responded to the question)

As shown in Table 5, students expressed a strong desire for more diverse and immersive musical experiences, emphasising the need for increased performance opportunities, international collaborations, and exposure to different musical cultures. A common theme in their responses was the importance of concerts, not only as a way to showcase their skills but also as learning experiences. Student 3 highlighted the value of exposure to professionals, noting that performances should be complemented with mentorship and guidance from experienced musicians who could provide students with insights into the realities of a musical career. Many students also demonstrated a keen interest in international exchange programs, viewing them as essential for their artistic and personal development. Student 10 shared this aspiration: "I would like to have the opportunity to go to other countries to attend concerts or to perform in concerts. It would be a great experience."

Table 5. Proposed additional musical activities desired by students

Suggestions	Responses
Concerts	62
Trips	59
Collaboration with other Music Schools	15
Lectures & Seminars	15
Choir Meetings	12
Collaboration with renowned professionals in the industry	6
Competitions	6
Musical Ensembles	6
"Equal opportunities compared to other Music Schools"	3

Students also highlighted the importance of frequent performances in a variety of contexts, as opportunities to build confidence and stage readiness. Student 13 emphasised the need for individual performance experiences: "It would be useful if students had more opportunities to perform individually in front of an audience. More than once a term," suggesting that consistent exposure to live performances is crucial for overcoming stage anxiety and refining musical expression. Lastly, students viewed music as a bridge for cultural exchange and social engagement. Student 38 suggested initiatives that foster networking and shared learning: "(...)Music schools around Cyprus should collaborate so students with a common desire for music can get to know each other." This highlights a broader need for inter-school musical collaborations that encourage students to connect and learn from each other's experiences.

Discussion

This study's results highlight a student's orientation towards practical, performance-oriented learning in the Music Schools of Cyprus. Lessons and ensembles were mentioned as key aspects of their musical development, correlating with other studies (Economidou Stavrou, 2006; Griffin, 2010). Teacher-student relationships developed through individual lessons, and the collaborative aspect of ensemble participation played an important role in motivating

musical and personal growth. These observations are consistent with those of Hallam et al. (2018), who stress the motivational power of pupil-oriented teaching methodologies in music teaching. The findings also align with Tzanaki (2011), who argued that ensemble participation fosters mutual interaction and engagement among music school students, such that, in addition to developing artistic capacity, it can also function as a social process, providing students with greater social ties and mutual support. Concerts and real-world performances prove especially effective in shaping the students' musical identities. Concerts, festivals, cooperations, and international exchanges (such as the trip to Vienna) were repeatedly described as transformative, expanding students' artistic horizons, increasing their confidence, and strengthening their commitment to music. This resonates with the findings of Zepatou et al. (2019) and Koliadi-Tiliakou (2023), who found that opportunities for cross-cultural exchanges and performance initiatives enhance students' learning, nurture identity development, and increase artistic confidence and intercultural understanding.

The students' responses, however, regarding the theoretical or historical subjects, mainly Byzantine and traditional music, were somewhat mixed. While some students recognised the cultural importance of these lessons, others felt disconnected from them or saw them as less relevant to their musical goals. This contrast highlights a tension previously noted in the literature: that parts of the curriculum focusing on historical or heritage content may be less attractive to students who do not perceive direct links to their modern musical practice (Ross, 1995; Spruce, 2015). Importantly, we understand that such mixed signals must be interpreted within the cultural context of Cyprus, which, throughout the country's history, has had two roles for music education: one is to protect and preserve the musical heritage of Greece and Cyprus, including Byzantine and traditional music, and the other is to prepare students for participation in global musical communities. This may explain why some students enjoy these subjects, while others see them as distant from the music that influences their daily lives. Additionally, the differing opinions expressed about the choir lesson also illustrate this dynamic. While some students claimed that choir experience was beneficial for teamwork, vocal technique, and group cohesion, others expressed dissatisfaction, attributing their negative experience to repertoire choices or the choir director's teaching style. These contrasting views support Renshaw's (2024) idea that the perceived value of group music-making depends on relational factors such as trust, communication, and the emotional environment fostered by the teacher. Therefore, these differences do not reflect an inconsistency in the subject but rather reveal the subtle and socially influenced nature of students' experiences.

Students' recommendations for curricular development indicated a strong desire for greater flexibility, modernisation, and autonomy. Several students advocated for the inclusion of modern genres, greater flexibility in instrumental choices, and subjects such as composition, orchestration, and conducting. These findings are consistent with calls in Cyprus and the international literature for curricula that incorporate informal learning activities, creative exploration, and student-led music activities into the general music classroom (Economidou et al., 2022; Green, 2008; Griffin, 2010). The findings of the current study further echo Tuovinen's (2024) and Economidou Stavrou's (2024) perceptions of music learners as co-constructors of their own educational pathways, rather than passive recipients of assigned material. The eagerness for more diverse ensembles, such as popular music groups, suggests an appeal to bridge the formal schooling gap closer to students' lived musical cultures.

Overall, these findings highlight the importance of Cyprus Music Schools negotiating between maintaining cultural integrity and responding to the present need for relevance to the contemporary world, as well as the need for creative freedom. Incorporating students' ideas, such as introducing modern ensembles, offering more creative opportunities, and expanding musical choices, could help create a curriculum that better responds to the evolving musical futures students envisage for themselves. This work, more generally, aligns with Renshaw's (2024) and Fielding's (2012) claims that music schools can offer spaces for public engagement, democratic participation, and creative citizenship when students take part in curriculum development.

These observations also align with studies from Greece (Fytika & Dionyssiou, 2016; Zafeiri, 2023) and echo international frameworks that promote integrating informal and creative practices into formal music education (Green, 2008; Griffin, 2010). Yfanti and Zorba (2010) argue that addressing rigid curricula through student voice and cultural responsiveness enhances both equity and musical excellence, concerns echoed by participants in this study. In this sense, the students' suggestions can be understood as expressions of the participatory movement in education identified by Tuovinen (2024), where learners become partners in designing inclusive and culturally responsive curricula. Similarly, Renshaw (2024) frames such agency as essential for renewing education through creativity, empathy, and shared responsibility. This approach does not mean that teachers should make lessons entertaining to attract students, give up their professional judgement, or replace courses that are not considered important to students in order to teach only what students want. Instead, it values students' voices while teachers continue to make informed pedagogical decisions (Economidou Stavrou, 2024). By amplifying student voice and nurturing an authentic learning community among students, teachers, and policymakers, Music Schools in Cyprus can become a future-focused community that embraces creative and diverse perspectives and respects both individual interests and needs as well as tradition and cultural heritage.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. The use of a questionnaire with open-ended questions yielded a broad range of insights into students' perceptions; however, the depth of the responses was necessarily more limited than that obtained through interviews or focus groups. Future studies could benefit from combining questionnaires with more interactive qualitative methods to allow richer exploration of students' views. The study also relied solely on student perspectives. Although this aligns with the focus on student voice, it excludes the viewpoints of teachers, school leaders, and parents, whose experiences could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the curriculum and its implementation. Including multiple stakeholder perspectives in future research would offer a more holistic picture of the educational environment. Another limitation concerns the timing of the data collection. Responses were collected at a single point in time during one school year, so changes in students' needs, interests, or experiences over time were not captured. Longitudinal studies following students over several years would be valuable for understanding how perceptions evolve throughout their time in the Music School. Additionally, although participation was high and included students from all five cities, the study did not analyse demographic differences such as gender, city, or years of study. Exploring these variables in future research could reveal more nuanced patterns in students' attitudes and experiences. Finally, while the open-ended questionnaire allowed students to express their views freely, some questions may

not have prompted the level of detail necessary to fully understand students' underlying reasoning or the contextual factors influencing their opinions. More targeted follow-up questions or prompts could enhance the interpretive depth of future studies.

Conclusion and Implications

This study highlights the importance that Cyprus Music School students place on practical, collaborative, and real-world learning experiences. Individual lessons, ensembles, concerts, and cultural exchanges serve as the foundation of their musical development and identity. These preferences mirror broader international trends that emphasise personalised, performance-focused learning environments. At the same time, the findings reveal opportunities for curriculum development. Students' suggestions to expand instrument choices, include modern genres, and incorporate creative subjects point to ways to better align music education with changing interests and career options. Subjects like Byzantine and traditional music, while culturally significant, could benefit from enriching the content and teaching methods to connect with today's students and experiences and integrate them with modern applications, where possible. Taken together, these findings support Tuovinen's (2024) and Renshaw's (2024) argument that music schools should act as spaces of civic engagement and creative citizenship. Viewing students as collaborators in curricular and institutional decision-making can transform music schools into laboratories for social connection, aligning artistic training with broader goals of empathy, inclusion, and cultural renewal. Policymakers and educators might consider trial programmes to introduce modern ensembles and broaden options by enhancing the curriculum with courses in composition and conducting. Employing frameworks such as Fielding's (2012) participatory education and Mitra's (2018) emphasis on student agency can help develop a more inclusive and artistically relevant curriculum for students in Cyprus Music schools.

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