

# Conductors and Board Members in Changing Times

Developing and equipping wind band conductors for the future

# Introduction

How can conductors, instructors and musical leaders in the wind band sector evolve in response to societal developments such as an ageing membership and a decline in membership numbers? What competences do they need? And are these competences adequately addressed by conductor training programmes?

Like any other sector in the world of music and culture, the wind band sector is facing changes.\* In this study, we identify the changes that most affect the wind band sector and what these developments mean for community bands and the work of conductors, instructors and musical leaders. LKCA – the National Centre of Expertise for Cultural Education and Amateur Arts – has examined this issue in cooperation with the Royal Dutch Music Organisation (KNMO), the Orchestra Conductors and Instructors Union (BvOI), the World Music Contest (WMC) and service provider and facilitator Musidesk Rijnbrink.

## What is the focus of the study?

The study *Conductors and Board Members in Changing Times* is based on a literature review of 33 sources, 26 in-depth interviews with conductors and board members across the country and a questionnaire survey which elicited responses from 141 conductors and 299 board members. Its findings reflect their views on societal developments and how these are affecting the sector, in addition to their views on training, competences and the nature of the profession. As such, the study can provide a basis for those involved in the wind band sector in formulating their plans for the future.

In this publication, we not only outline the answers to eight key questions, but also go on to discuss some striking insights that emerged from the study.

Over two thousand community bands are affiliated to the Royal Dutch Music Association (KNMO). A range of surveys suggest that this represents a large proportion of the total number of community bands in the Netherlands. An average of two conductors are active at any given community band, but not on a full-time basis: most conductors work with several community bands and combine these activities with other work in order to earn a living.

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\* In the Dutch context, this is referred to as the HaFaBra-sector, where 'Ha' stands for 'Harmonie' (woodwind, brass, percussion and sometimes low strings), 'Fa' for 'Fanfare' (brass, saxophone, percussion) and 'Bra' for 'Brass Band' (brass, percussion). Also the SMP-sector belongs to the HaFaBra-sector. SMP stands for Show, Marching and Percussion. The bands or ensembles belonging to this sector, comparable with HaFaBra, are also led by conductors or so-called instructors.

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A large white number '1' is centered in the upper half of the image. The background is a vibrant, abstract composition of yellow, orange, and blue geometric shapes, including triangles and rectangles, creating a dynamic and modern aesthetic.

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# Societal trends





# 1. Societal trends

## Are there important societal trends for the music sector?

Several trends emerged from this study.

### COVID-19

One factor of particular relevance is the global COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences. However, it not entirely clear how this impact should be interpreted. One view is that the pandemic served as a catalyst that exacerbated pre-existing developments in the sector, such as the decline in membership numbers. The fact that members could no longer perform or rehearse in the same space dampened their enthusiasm about being a member of a band. Some community bands see it as an achievement that they have been able to keep their membership stable.

### Declining numbers, ageing and dejuvenation: more people leaving than joining, with a marked decline among younger members

One development that predates COVID-19 is the decline in membership experienced by several community bands. In some regions, this can be linked to a general decline in population, especially in less urban areas more deeply affected by ageing and less long-term commitment among younger generations. The days when children automatically joined the community band where their mum and dad play are clearly over. Another factor is that young people often move away from the region and are therefore lost to the band in the community where they grew up.

*'In the province of Noord-Holland, I see a lot of bands becoming very small and that really makes you wonder about the future.'*

Some respondents see declining membership as a sign of the times: people lead busier lives and children are too busy engaging in other forms of leisure activities to commit to their local community band. Moreover, the sector has an image problem: people associate it with marching down the street wearing 'weird uniforms'. Some respondents see the fact that conductors have to work with multiple bands in order to make an independent living as another sign of changing times.

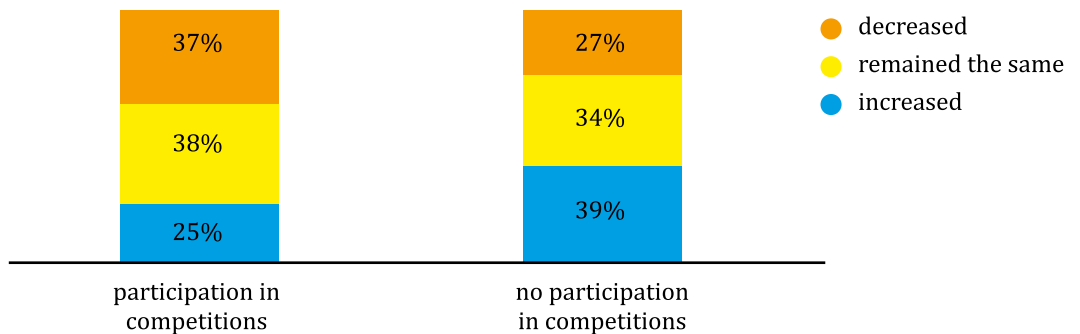
Over the past five years, the proportion of young people has been particularly small in highly urban regions and youth membership has been declining. The largest decreases are to be found in the age group 19 years or younger and in total membership numbers. There is relatively high influx of people over 50: this may be due to new members and people moving through from the 35-49 age group. Perhaps the main conclusion is that, over the past five years, the members leaving have outnumbered the new arrivals, and this shortfall is highest among the under-19s.

The perceptions of board members and conductors can differ: conductors see an average of three bands, whereas boards oversee two bands on average. On the whole, conductors tend to see slightly more of an increase, while board members report more of a decline. From the conductors' perspective, the membership trend in the southern province of Limburg deviates significantly from the norm, with hardly any bands experiencing a membership increase in the past five years. That said, Limburg is also home to a relatively large number of bands compared to other regions.

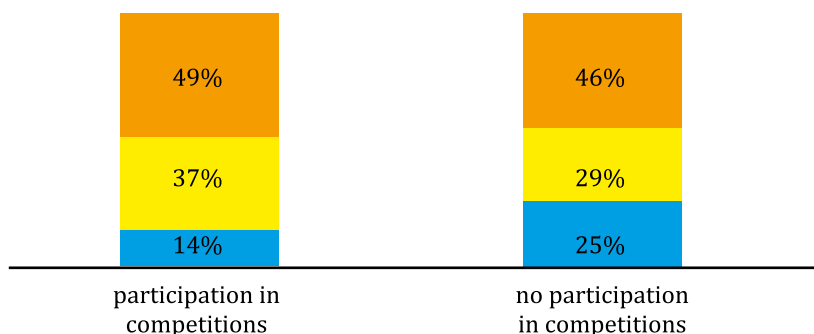
### Waning enthusiasm for music competitions

Another factor is that the enthusiasm for participating in music competitions is no longer prevalent in the sector. More than half of the community bands say they do not take part in competitions, and the same applies to almost a third of conductors. There also seems to be a slight correlation between participation in competitions and decline: community bands which are more competitive appear to suffer more from declining membership and attract fewer new members. This questionnaire does not provide a sufficient basis for determining whether this is a causal relationship. In interviews, respondents do mention that taking part in competitions becomes more difficult when too few members perform at a high level. That is an issue for these bands, but not so much in those bands that no longer compete.

**Conductors:** membership trends in bands that do and do not participate in competitions



**Board members:** membership trends in bands that do and do not participate in competitions



## **Signs of the times: secularisation, cultural sector cuts and music school closures**

Wider societal trends that affect community bands but are not limited to the sector include secularisation, cuts in the cultural sector and the closure of music schools. In some regions, there is a direct relationship between the church and the wind band. Connections to a church or organisational sponsorship, for example, tend to be local rather than national.

Support from church or local organisations has become less of a factor but can still be relevant. Multi-disciplinary centres and teacher collectives have partly taken the place of music schools, and there are also arts teachers who work as self-employed professionals in the sector. The questionnaire responses indicate that the supply of music lessons in the area is generally sufficient (their quality was not surveyed). Supply is higher in highly urban municipalities than in other less densely populated locations.

## **Regionally organised**

The wind band sector is highly regionalised, which has implications for organisational capacity, support, ageing and rejuvenation. Some regional community bands are more effectively organised than others. It also makes a difference whether the community bands are located near or far from the Netherlands' major urban centres in the west of the country. In the provinces of Gelderland, Limburg and Brabant, the number of community bands is relatively high, while in Zuid-Holland and Noord-Holland the reverse is true. At the same time, in proportion to the number of residents, the community bands are evenly distributed between urban and non-urban areas.

## **How do any changes in society affect the mission, vision and approach of community bands?**

The study highlights three different responses to this question:

- There are community bands that stick to their traditions as much as possible, encouraging achievement and taking part in competitions. They make every effort to maintain a full line-up, even hiring musicians and engaging in temporary, project-based cooperative ventures. This can even mean merging with another community band and having to overcome cultural differences in the process.
- There are community bands that put a greater focus on education, the joy of playing, innovation, motivation and social aspects. These bands move with the times and the shifting demands of society. For example, they offer their own educational activities, invest in younger age groups and have scaled down or stopped participation in competitions. Community bands with an active or very active youth policy often provide a comprehensive package of activities aimed at young people; this includes ongoing collaboration with primary and



secondary schools, often with music schools and sometimes offering lessons themselves. For example, more than half of the community bands organise introductory lessons in schools. Many also have a youth/training band, a youth committee and special activities. It is also worth noting that not all community bands have a youth policy.

- There are also community bands which say they have not been affected by the trend towards declining membership, especially in the younger age groups.

*'As a community band, you can end up in a kind of downward spiral; members drop out when you take a competitive, traditional approach. Having a smaller, incomplete line-up, often consisting of older members, makes it even less appealing to play with the band, which leads more members to quit.'*

Community bands that have experienced a decline in membership mainly explain this in terms of external factors. Bands that have seen membership increase mainly put this down to internal factors. In the face of external factors that apply across the board, we also see evidence of community bands being successful. As an explanation, they point to internal factors. This leads us to conclude that, as a community band, you can apparently exert a degree of control by making changes that may prove more effective in retaining and attracting members. This is their response to trends in society at large. There are all kinds of ways in which community bands can prevent or reverse declining membership. These might include a change of repertoire, project-based or social activities, a greater focus on the joy of playing and developing a youth policy.

## **Youth policy**

A prominent example of such an internal factor is youth policy. Community bands can vary considerably in this regard. Overall, quantitative research suggests that having an active youth policy does not necessarily lead to an increase in membership. However, there is a correlation between an active youth policy and a lower average age among a community band's members. In addition, developing an effective approach for children and young people represents a challenge for several community bands, while some make no attempt to initiate such an approach.

For various reasons, an active youth policy can sometimes struggle to get off the ground. This can occur when the community band does not treat it as an objective, when the requisite knowledge and expertise is not present within the community band and/or when initiatives meet with little enthusiasm from local schools. There are also board members who believe that activities aimed at children and/or young people are too expensive and/or produce too little in terms of results. But it is also important to note that some community bands do have very successful youth policies, sometimes with several thriving youth bands. These community bands may be able to support other bands by supplying them with the relevant knowledge and expertise, a practice that is already happening here and there.

### **Decline: acceptance and anticipation**

Some community bands accept a decline in membership as a given. They indicate that their membership is waning due to circumstances and maintain that it has nothing to do with the nature of their organisation. For many community bands, the decline is mainly evident among younger members and they have difficulty inspiring and retaining enough children and young people due to a lack of interest or motivation among this group. Under these circumstances, retaining a stable membership among this age group is seen as a bonus. Other community bands take a more targeted approach in their view, by modernising their approach and their methods. They see this as the reason why their membership is growing: they have focused on specific groups, developed an appealing repertoire, fostered a good atmosphere and found themselves an appealing conductor.

### **Ageing: a natural process**

An increasing number of community bands are experiencing a rise in the average age of their members, possibly related to wider ageing issues in the surrounding area. It is worth noting that ageing in a community band and/or area can have a positive effect on membership: there are a number of thriving community bands aimed at seniors. It remains to be seen whether specifically targeting older people and people taking up music again in later life is a sustainable strategy, especially given that older members often quit between the ages of 70 and 75 for physical reasons. The relatively large number of baby boomers is therefore likely to decline sharply in the coming decades. When it comes to younger age groups, community bands will eventually have to attract members from a smaller pool.





The background is a vibrant yellow. It features several large, overlapping geometric shapes in blue and orange. In the top right, there is an orange triangle pointing downwards. On the left side, there is a vertical blue rectangle. In the lower half, there are two large triangles meeting at their vertices: one blue triangle pointing upwards and one orange triangle pointing downwards. To the right of these triangles, there is a large white number '2' with a thick stroke, set against an orange background.

# The competences of conductors

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## 2. The competences of conductors

**How are the demands made on professionals shifting in response to changes in society?**

### **The ability to enthuse and engage**

The various changes taking place inside and outside community bands are also reflected in the demands that these organisations are increasingly making on conductors. In response to declining membership numbers, this means that conductors are increasingly being asked to focus on enthusing and engaging members, both old and new. Several community bands are starting to focus more on education, the joy of playing, innovation, motivation and the social aspects of band membership. They put some of the responsibility for this shift in emphasis on the shoulders of their conductors.

*'There are no exams that assess the pedagogical, social side of things. It is perfectly possible for someone to have the full range of knowledge and skills, and yet not have a good rapport with a band. Perhaps you have a hard time connecting with a group like that. Or they walk all over you or you are always getting angry [...]. In practice, that's something that receives hardly any attention.'*

### **A more demand-driven approach**

At several community bands, the focus is on youth policy. For conductors, this can mean that they are expected to be good at dealing with a younger target group. This creates a need to adapt the repertoire, for example, so that conductors can focus more on the joy of playing and take a quicker route to playing together (direct pay-off). A demand-driven approach and inviting young members to have their say can lead to success.

### **Involvement in recruitment activities**

With the demise of music schools, education is becoming a more prominent issue. To recruit young members, an increasing number of community bands are organising activities in schools. Generally, this is not the conductor's responsibility, but it can require their involvement. In some cases, declining membership also leads to mergers and so the conductor needs to be able to handle cultural differences effectively so that the merged band will work together as a whole/team.

### **Conductors are mostly self-employed**

Membership trends aside, there are other important changes at play. One is the ongoing rise in self-employed professionals in the Netherlands. This also applies to conductors. Almost all conductors are not on the payroll but work as sole traders (referred to as *zzp'er* in the Dutch system). This requires conductors to have



entrepreneurial skills and sufficient knowledge and capabilities in areas such as bookkeeping, pension plans, promotion, acquisition and drawing up a business plan.

**What competences do conductors, instructors and musical leaders need to have? Have certain competences become more or less important?**

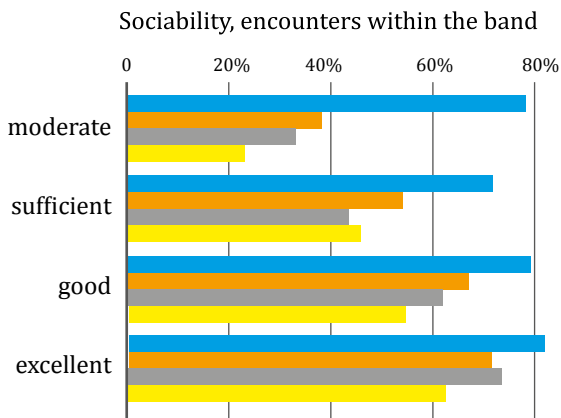
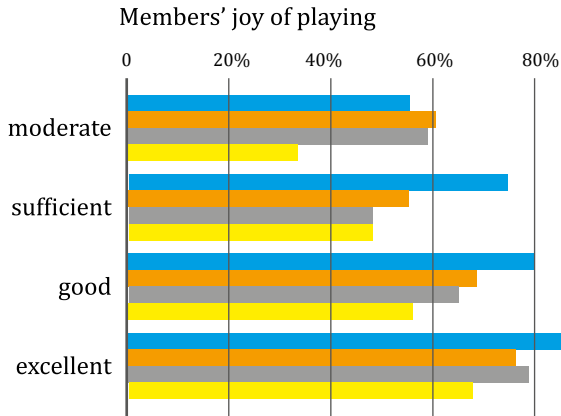
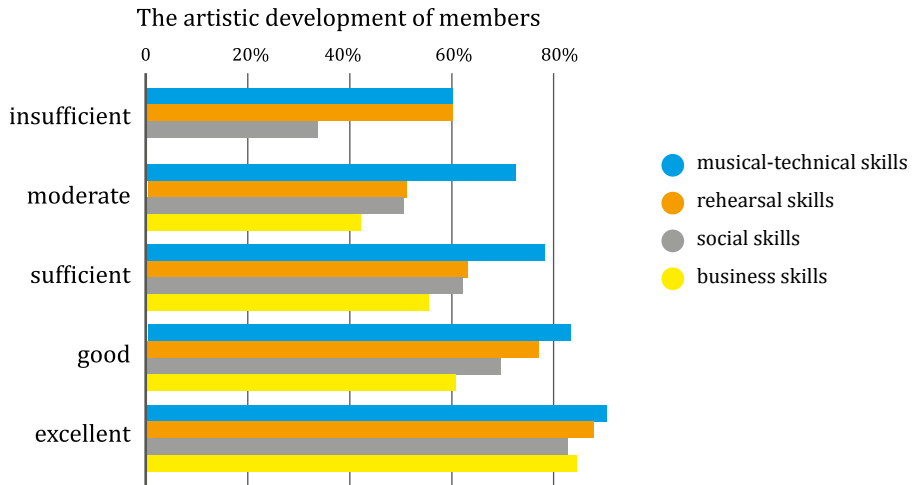
**Broad competence profile with emphasis on field-specific expertise and social skills**

For this study, 23 competences were classified into four groups of skills: musical-technical, rehearsal, social and business. Conductors and board members all see these skills as relevant, but not to the same extent.

The more importance board members attach to artistic goals, the more importance they attach to all four skill groups. The same applies to conductors: the more they contribute to the band's artistic goals in their work, the more importance they attach to all four skill groups.

Conductors and board members consider rehearsal skills to be particularly important, followed by musical-technical and social skills. Both consider the business skills of conductors to be less important, although conductors attach greater importance to business skills than board members do. At the same time, most conductors say they want to develop their musical-technical skills more than other skills. It emerged from the interviews that conductors sometimes have their doubts about the level of expertise among board members: some cited examples where they had to step into a board member's role or address practical peripheral matters. We also hear that conductors see themselves as the only professionals in a work setting that consists of volunteers/amateurs, and that this presents challenges.

Community bands where more prominence is given to the social aspect show a different picture. For the objectives 'sociability, encounters within the band' and 'members' joy of playing', the only correlation is with rehearsal skills and social skills. The more important they consider these goals to be, the more important they attach to these two skills. A similar pattern can be seen among the conductors: the more they are involved in achieving social goals through their work, the greater the importance they attach to their rehearsal skills and social skills, as opposed to musical-technical skills and business skills. The younger conductors interviewed indicated that they are mainly there for the good of the band and not for themselves: it's about allowing the whole band to shine.



Board members – satisfaction with 'important or very important' competences/skills, as opposed to the degree to which various goals are achieved

## **Other correlations**

The board members of community bands experiencing an increase in their membership are more likely to be satisfied with their conductors' social competences and business skills. They see conductors as people who, for example, are open to ideas and ambitions of the band, who actively encourage a positive atmosphere within the band and who initiate cooperative ventures with other musicians, community bands, companies and organisations outside the band. In addition, these board members are more satisfied with the way in which the band is represented and promoted externally than the board members of community bands with no increase in membership.

## **Conductor roles that have gained in importance**

A range of roles and tasks fulfilled by the conductor appear to have gained in importance:

- Forming a bond (among members and between conductor and members)
- A good working relationship
- Cooperation (including parties outside the community band)
- Group dynamics (being able to recognise and deal with them)
- Servant leadership (supply-driven working)
- Acting as a motivator
- Educating and encouraging the creative development of young people
- Adapting or arranging pieces for a limited line-up or instrumentation
- Innovation (e.g. new forms of presentation)
- Repertoire (e.g. light music)
- Events

In addition, competences related to working as a self-employed professional have gained in importance (e.g. entrepreneurial skills, personal promotion and business skills).

# Training programmes for conductors

# 3



### 3. The education and training of conductors

**In the view of conductors, instructors and musical leaders, are the relevant competences adequately addressed by the education and training they receive?**

**The education that conductors receive is good, but...**

Generally speaking, the education that conductors receive at conservatories and music universities in the Netherlands equip them with musical-technical skills at a high level. Conductors are satisfied with the education they receive. Board members are particularly satisfied with conductors' musical-technical skills. They are somewhat less satisfied with other competences, such as rehearsal and social skills.

The emphasis in the curriculum of most educational programmes for conductors seems to be on musical-technical skills. Other areas, such as social skills, receive less attention. This is also reflected in the responses to the questionnaire. These show a positive correlation between board members' satisfaction with skills other than musical-technical skills and the achievement of the community band's goals. From this perspective too, we can hypothesise that, with a view to achieving the community band's goals, it would be more beneficial if conductors were to develop their rehearsal skills, social skills and management skills.

The conductors' musical-technical skills may already be of a sufficient quality to work with amateur bands, in which case, there are no more gains to be made in that area: the community bands do not need conductors with better musical-technical skills.

In their education, conductors have developed their musical-technical skills to a sufficient level. This is also reflected in the response to questions on the balance between what they learned during their studies and what they put into practice at work. In instances where they are dissatisfied with this balance, they do not put this down to musical-technical skills.

**... their pedagogical-didactic training is insufficient ...**

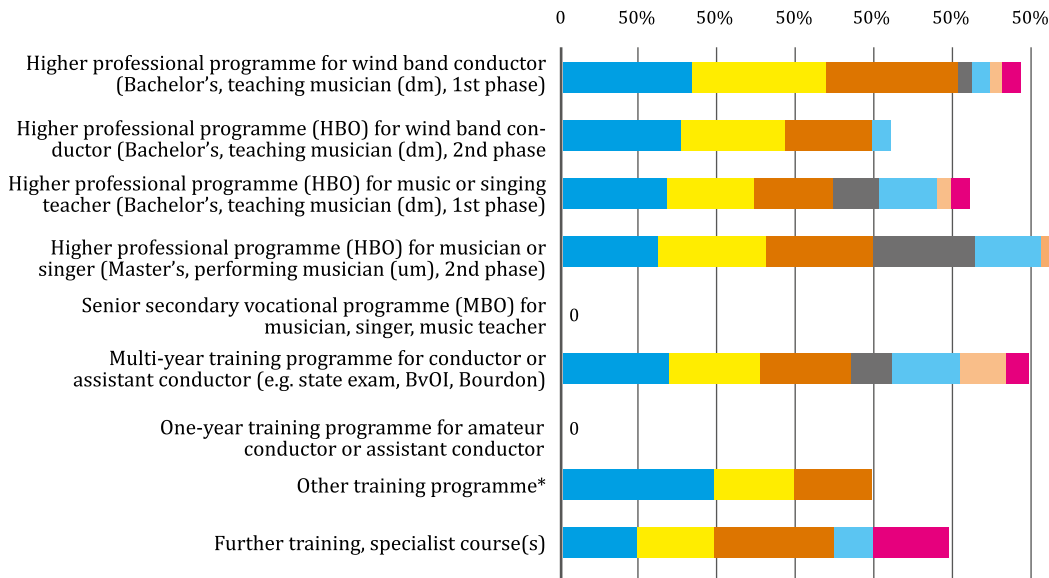
The main shortcomings mentioned by conductors who think their education has not prepared them well enough for their work are the dynamics and the pedagogical/didactic aspects of working with amateur bands and a lack of preparation for how to be an entrepreneur. This applies across all educational programmes. Yet in terms of pursuing their own development, they most often express a desire to work on their musical-technical skills.



**... and the curriculum does not reflect the changing times effectively**

A number of conductors, and even more board members, think that the education conductors receive should place greater emphasis on issues that are more relevant to how many wind bands operate nowadays. These include psychology, soft skills, group dynamics, education, enthusing and engaging children and young people, dealing with non-standard (extended or incomplete) line-ups and adapting to a lighter and more contemporary repertoire. There are also conductors who argue in favour of a wider range of tracks within the educational programmes: offering students the opportunity to aim for the highest level in the sector or to gear themselves more towards amateur, social and/or youth settings. Another point made by a number of conductors is that the curriculum could focus more on knowledge and skills related to working as a self-employed professional. Interestingly, there are no major differences between the views of young conductors who have recently graduated and their older counterparts. It is unclear whether this means that there have been no significant changes in the education offered or whether younger conductors take a different perspective on possible changes in the field of education.

For which aspects of the job does the curriculum fail to prepare the conductor properly?



\* Of the conductors who took another training programme, 100% indicated that it did not prepare them well for entrepreneurship / working as a self-employed professional.

- entrepreneurship / working as a self-employed professional
- dynamics of working with (amateur) bands
- pedagogy/didactics with bands
- repertoire knowledge
- percussion and conducting technique and skills
- music theory
- other

## **Where and how are professionals educated?**

### **Almost all conductors have completed formal training**

Almost all of the conductors involved in this study have taken one or more educational programmes in order to work as a conductor. In most cases, this is the higher professional degree programme to become a professional conductor of wind bands. Only 3% have had no formal training as a conductor.

It is interesting to note that conductors say there are clear differences in quality and image between conservatories. A number of conservatories are more highly regarded among conductors, others significantly less so. In expressing their views, they emphasise the central role of the educator (e.g. the principal subject teacher) rather than the educational institution as a whole.

## **What opportunities exist for professionals to continue their learning and professional development?**

### **Numerous opportunities for continuing education**

There are numerous opportunities for conductors to further their professional development and continue learning. Awareness of these opportunities appears to be relatively high: 30% of conductors say they have taken further training or professional courses. Of this group, two-thirds took private lessons from a recognised teacher/trainer, half took a BvOI-related training course and one-third took classes at regional music associations. Conductors also mention workshops and master classes abroad. From the interviews, we conclude that further learning as preparation for conducting a symphony orchestra can also be regarded as professional development: the ambitions of a few reach further than the wind band sector.

## **Do they make use of these opportunities? If so, how?**

### **Why do or don't professionals take advantage of these opportunities?**

### **The wish for further training often goes unfulfilled**

Several conductors believe they should do more in terms of further training. While conductors recognise the importance of further training, they also admit that they do not make enough use of the opportunities available. One reason given is lack of time: their standard work as a conductor (combined in some cases with another job) leaves them with too little time to pursue further training. Besides, most conductors are self-employed and, generally speaking, this group are less likely to take part in further training.

Some conductors state that the subject matter of the further training opportunities does not appeal to them. For example, there is too much of a focus on musical-technical skills, whereas this group needs more training in entrepreneurship, social competences, personal development and innovation. Nevertheless, a larger group do feel the need for further development as regards their musical role.

## Disagreeably competitive

Some conductors dislike the nature of many of the further training opportunities available. They think there is too much of a focus on competition, hierarchy and assessment. Some conductors report feeling lonely and insecure as a result. In several areas of this study, an overall picture emerges of the sector as competitive. This does not always chime with the mindset and vision of conductors (and community bands). This group may have a greater need for the open and equal sharing of knowledge among peers: a space where people feel secure enough to be vulnerable.

*'When you put conductors together, there's always a tendency towards bravado and cockiness. Nobody never has a problem. [...] the moment you say: I know you're looking for help because there are things you don't know, people see it as a kind of weakness. That's also kind of how things work on the music scene. And even when you start at the conservatory [...] you have to be able to do it right away. It's really weird when you think about it.'*

At the same time, we also spoke to conductors who do engage in further development, only not by taking up the opportunities offered by the professional association (BvOI). They often bypass the association and go in search of options that better suit their own needs.

The background features a complex geometric pattern of overlapping triangles and polygons in bright yellow, vibrant blue, and warm orange. A large, white, stylized number '4' is positioned in the upper right quadrant, set against a yellow background.

4

**Other insights**



## 4. Other insights

### The goals of community bands

Community bands can be geared towards achieving different goals. For many board members, ‘the joy of playing’ and ‘sociability’ are paramount; other community bands focus more on ‘artistic’ goals. These are mainly the community bands (less than half of the total number) that take part in competitions. The higher the level of competition, the stronger this correlation is (i.e. the more importance they attach to these artistic goals).

In general, board members say they succeed in achieving the goals that have been set. To some degree, this is due to the commitment of the conductor, especially when the conductor’s competences correspond well with the goals of the community band.

### Relationship between board and conductor

Board members are generally satisfied with the conductors and this also applies to their relationship and cooperation. Conversely, conductors are usually satisfied with the community band’s board as well. The aspects they are satisfied with include good communication, mutual respect, good ideas, motivation, feedback and appreciation.

Yet almost 1 in 10 conductors are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the relationship. Conductors often work with several community bands and note that the situation can differ greatly from one to another. Conductors sometimes express dissatisfaction with a non-professional/amateur board that does not always constitute a sound discussion partner for a professional conductor. Poor communication is also an issue in some cases, along with a lack of strategy/vision on the part of the board, overburdening the conductor and not providing enough support.

### Finding the right conductor

Almost half of the community bands had one or more vacancies for a conductor in the past five years. This indicates a high level of movement and mobility in the sector. Most community bands experience little difficulty in filling the vacancy for a conductor. However, in 2022 it was harder to fill a vacancy than in the previous four years.

The extent to which a setting is urban is another factor in this respect. Community bands in towns and cities find it slightly easier to fill their vacancies. In the data available, the number of community bands with vacancies in some provinces is too low to draw conclusions on the differences between provinces. In the interviews, we mainly spoke to conductors who have worked with a community band for a long time, in some cases 10 years or more. Only a few of the interviewees had moved from one community band to another.



### **Inclusion and diversity not an issue**

One topic conspicuous by its absence in the study, in terms of societal developments, is inclusion and diversity. If this issue was mentioned at all in the open-ended interviews, it was only very sporadically and was seen as a problem: a subsidy obligation that is not in keeping with the tradition in the sector. If the subject turned to Antillean brass bands, for example, this was referred to as an expression of a different culture rather than part of the wind band sector. It would appear that the changing times affecting the sector do not cover inclusion and diversity.

## **Publishing details**

*Conductors and Board Members in Changing Times*  
*Developing and equipping wind band conductors for the future*

*This study was initiated at the request of the Expertise Network for Amateur Music in the Netherlands (EAN), which involves the following organisations: KNMO, BvOI, Musidesk Rijnbrink, WMC and LKCA.*

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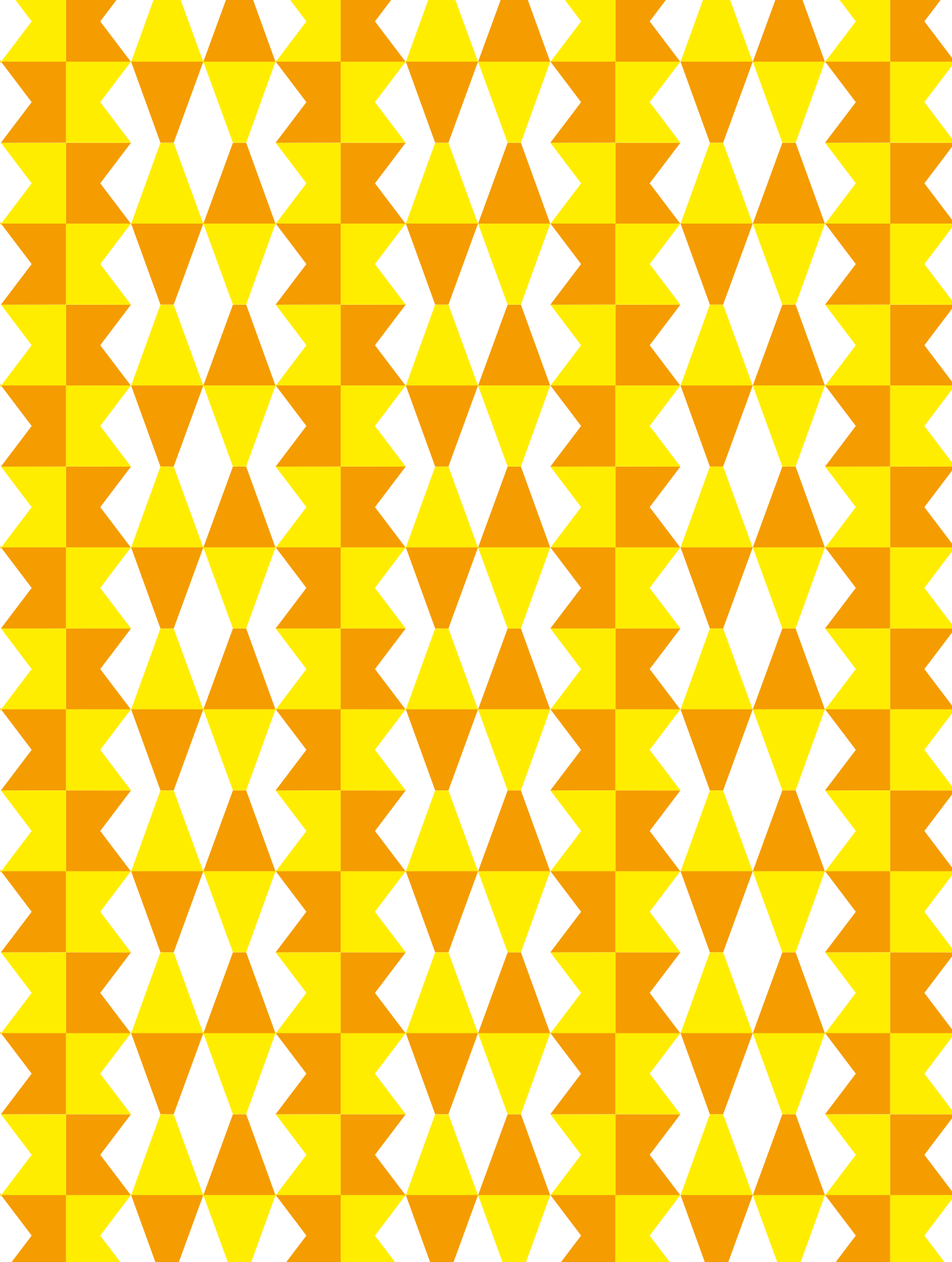
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