

ANXIETY ENCODED IN PERSONALITY: MUSICAL PERSONALITY AND THE ANXIETY OF THE MUSICIANS

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SUMMARY. The aim of the study is to provide a brief introduction to the cultural history of the personality psychological based findings of the musical profession. As we can see, in the different historical areas very wide variety of views appeared, until in the second half of 20th century music psychology, as evidence based empirical discipline formalised these naive theories. The most important findings were that the personality structure of musicians is fundamentally differs from the normal population (1); and the constantly reported higher level of anxiety-related traits in the case of musicians (2). The latter finding highlights the importance of teaching different techniques of mental hygienical interventions during the music teacher training courses in order to avoid psychopathological symptomatizing and the short-term burn-out of career entrant teachers.

Keywords: musical personality, anxiety, performance, music, psychology.

1. The Specificity of the „Musical Personality”

One of the main foot-stones of music psychology is the axiom that somehow the musician's' psychical structure – in the widest context – differs from the normal population. This thesis was confirmed by several times by different empirical psychological research data. For example, Steele et al. reported higher level of neural connectivity and white matter plasticity in the area of corpus callosum³; Greenberg, Rentfrow and Baron-Cohen found positive connection between musical experiences and emotional-regulation and empathy⁴; while Swaminathan and Schellenberg described strong correlations among the practising different form of arts – mostly

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³ Steele et al. 2013. 1286.

⁴ Greenberg, Rentfrow and Baron-Cohen 2015. 88.

music – and advanced cognitive abilities⁵. We could continue this extremely long and continuously increasing list of findings about the specificity of the musician profession and its indisputable benefits for the everyday life of the developing youngsters, but the limitations and direct aims of this article do not allow us to elaborate in details all of these effects. (For further information see the works of E. Glenn Schellenberg, Isabelle Peretz and Robert Zatorre.) Although as we shortly demonstrated before, the extended music psychological literature seems to pay relatively little attention to the personality structure of the musicians. This observation is quite surprising considering that according to the current psychological knowledge personality is the main schema of individual cognition and emotion-regulation which defines how we perceive the world around us and the possible ways of reactions to these influences.⁶ If we accept this thesis it becomes easily understandable that if we are able to detect individual differences in several aspects of cognition and interpersonal behavioural manifestations, there should be a general, comprehensive pattern behind these symptoms embedded into the personality – as the most complex and extended intrapsychic system of humans. As we indicated above, there is a relatively small number of research findings dedicated to explore the possible nature of the speciality of the musicians personality, but fortunately there are some available data with which we can better understand this phenomenon. In the followings we demonstrate the naive historical views about the role of musicians and their personality and we will try to synthesize them with the empirical results.

2. Early Historical Perspectives of Musical Personality

Our cultural historical journey dates back to the „dawn of times”, to the born of the first archaic musical instruments⁷. While the visual artistically remains from the prehistorically times have a relatively wide variety, we have only limited and indirect data about the musical life of this era. According to the disclosed archaeological artefacts, It seems to be quite accepted and consensual, that the musicians had an important role in the sacral life of the early tribal communities (besides other special status member of the tribe, like the shaman or the „painters” of the cave-walls, as early visual-artists). As we indicated above, we have no „records” about the musical work of the prehistoric world, we only have some reference, which

⁵ Swaminathan and Schellenberg 2014. 365.

⁶ Carver and Scheier 2012. 2.

⁷ Bandi 2015. 148.

suggest us, that the early musicians have a special status in their community. Reznikoff⁸ reported that in the prehistoric exploration sites the archaeologists found special objects, which had no apparent function. This was pretty weird, because most of the previously explored objects had a well-defined purpose; the scientist was able to determine their possible function. After an extended research process, the archaeologists came up with a hypothesis: since these mysterious objects were found in the best acoustical areas of the cave, they could be the earliest forms of musical instruments. Besides this very interesting finding, these instruments were located directly near the sacral accessories of the shamans, which suggest us that thesis locational patterns could be in correlational connection with the social status.

Naturally these findings are indirect and in several cases, contain presumptions, but it is important to note, that in the lack of direct proofs and empirical data, these theories are the best we have in order to delineate the possible nature of the prehistorical musical life.

3. Ancient Role of Musicians and their Attributes

Thanks to the extended ancient literature, in their case we have much more opportunity to get insight to their beliefs, cultural arrangements and social system. Our main interest is to identify those cultural remains, which highlight and describe for us the general and comprehensive impressions about the personality of the musicians.⁹

For example, in the ancient Egyptian religious beliefs Hathor, the god of music, had a special mission that came directly from the king of gods, Osiris. This sacred mission was to civilize the men on earth with the power of music – practically he was one of the first music-teacher in the history, who recognised as well the transfer-effects of musical training.¹⁰

In the Greek civilisation Apollo had a similar role. He was – besides several other functions – the god of „music and light“, which is quite interesting regarding the meaning of light as symbol: in the western culture light is often connected to attributes like knowledge, wisdom, and conscience, mental rising. We can easily assume, if the two functions (music and light) were assigned to one celestial being, there could be a connection between these function: music and knowledge are attached.¹¹

⁸ Reznikoff 2008. 4140.

⁹ Bandi 2015. 148.

¹⁰ Pinch 2002. 194.

¹¹ Rose 2005. 113.

The ancient Romans also had a goddess with multiple roles, who was responsible for music. This goddess is Minerva, who – besides being the patroness of musicians – was also assigned to qualities like common sense, knowledge and intellectual achievements which is clearly parallel with the attributes of the formerly mentioned two other sacral entity.¹²

Summarizing the information above about the ancient world, a quite special picture is delineating on the personality and social aspects of musicians. The musicians are chosen to bring light, knowledge, civilisation to humankind: their role is to be the mediator of these divine characteristics with the use of music training and performance. These naïve views are in clear connection with the later empirical findings about the – several times implicit or subconscious – effects of music, which can be in special cases even more efficient than psychotherapy interventions.¹³

4. Messengers of God or Servants of the Devil?

In contrast with the ancient times, at the late middle ages and in the early modern period an entirely different view appeared in the case of musicians. The formerly idealistic idea about the special status and role of musicians, as the representative of the divine forces and the trustee of the tendencies of civilising humankind, faded away. Instead of this, a dichotomy picture outlined about musicians.

One – and probably the largest – group of musicians found institutionalized work as musical professional in the bond of the (Catholic) church. In this position they were in a relatively safe position: they got financial safety, the church facilitated the creation of religious compositions and their social appreciation was relative high. A good example of this type of musicians is the work of Johann Sebastian Bach, as the chorus-master of the St. Thomas Church in Leipzig.

On the other hand, those musicians who practised their profession outside of the church were surrounded with the suspicion of being morally “disputable”. While within the borders of the church the musicians served the greatness of God, outside they were seen as sinners: their musical practice was the instrument, or even the cause of vicious thoughts and behaviours. One of the best example for this view is the case of Paganini: he was so talented master of his violin (virtuoso), that those who envied him started to spread a gossip about him, that he has sold his soul to the devil in order to gain extra ordinal (or even superhuman) musical abilities.¹⁴

¹² Rose 2005. 88.

¹³ Bandi 2015. 148.

¹⁴ Bandi 2015. 149.

Overall, we can state, that there was a radical change in the earlier views on the personality of musicians. From their idealistic position, the musicians got into a dual status, divided between the heavenly- and the infernal spheres. In the following a whole different aspect will arise, but as we will see, it has several linking points with these early, naive approaches.

5. The Psychoanalytic View of Arts and Musicians

With the appearance of Sigmund Freud in the early years of the 20th century the whole scientific life and thinking has changed. He and his work is inevitable – even in the contemporary empirical-ruled research era –, therefore it is not surprising, that he also had contribution to the artistic personality structure. The phrasing is not accidental or a mistake: Freud do not really have anything to say about musicians, but in the same time he pretty liked the works of several former (like Leonardo da Vinci) and some modern visual artist. According to the „gossip-analytical” notes Freud envied the musicians, because with the simple presentation of musical structures they could achieve deeper genuine emotional reactions than Freud with several years of active and exhausting psychoanalytic therapy.¹⁵

Although Freud did not really deal with musicians, his thought about the artistic personality structure is applicable in their case too.¹⁶ The main idea is that the artists are very similar to the (clinical) neurotically patients: they have (severe) anxious problems which they repress to subconscious level. If these neurotically contents cannot be expressed and brought to conscious level, they could cause psychopathological symptoms. This is the point, where the neurotically and artistic people are showing important differences: while the former group is characterised with stable, robust and inflexible defence mechanisms, the repressions of the musicians are semipermeable which means that they can express and reframe their inner conflicts much more easily. However, it is not just simple acting-out: the instinctive sexual or destructive tendencies completely lose their original nature and become acceptable in a highly intellectual and aesthetical way. This process helps the artists to get rid of their intrapersonal tension, while at same time they provide a projective surface for the recipients to help them elaborate their own feelings. This process is called sublimation and this is one of the highest ordered defence mechanisms. Practically Freud believed that the artists are special, because they are able to easily reframe their own conflicts into an aesthetically high-quality product, with which they

¹⁵ Chesire 1996. 1127.

¹⁶ Bandi 2015. 150.

gain relief and at the same time they help other people who meet with their pieces of art, to find object for their subconscious materials in order to avoid psychological problems. We could say that in this theory the artists (so musicians as well) serve as (self-healing) mental-hygienical professionals.

One of Freud's followers, Theodore Reik, conceptualised a brand new and coherent model about the effect of music and its connection to the subconscious materials.¹⁷ Reik's main idea was that the repressed subconscious feelings and thoughts are trying to reach the surface of consciousness through melodies. These so called „haunting melodies” are little pieces of musical arts which are “stuck” in one's head and they are recurring again and again. In order to stop this process (to reach the surface of consciousness) the person has to „realize” the „message” of the melody: he/she has to find the real, analytical meaning of the melody, has to find out and elaborate the repressed intrapersonal conflict. If this procedure ends, the person gets the opportunity to face and cope with the actual problems.

The psychoanalytical approach provided a quite interesting and relatively comprehensive model to the understanding of musical personality. However, we must mention the frequent criticism around the dynamical views: most of the components of the model are not verifiable empirically (for example see the concept of subconsciousness), therefore in the contemporary fields of research it cannot be declared as scientifically valid. On the other hand, the clinical practice several times verified the relevance of dynamic psychology, so the best we can state is that the reputation of this approach is doubtful.

6. Trait-Based Description of the Personality of Musicians

Trait-based personality psychology is the most up-to-dated wing of this field.¹⁸ Against its popularity, this approach got several critics, but regarding the limitations of this article, for further information sees the literature cited above.

In a trait-based framework, Anthony Kemp, a professor in the famous University of Oxford, described first the personality structure of classical musicians in a thorough, systematically way.^{19,20,21,22} In the form of a cross sectional study Kemp observed three groups of musicians: secondary-school

¹⁷ Illing, 2015. 326.

¹⁸ Mirnics, 2006. 31.

¹⁹ Kemp, 1981a. 3.

²⁰ Kemp, 1981b. 69.

²¹ Kemp, 1982. 48.

²² Kemp, 1996. 1.

musician students, students for the musical programs of different art universities and at least but not last professional musicians. To every experimental group a so called “control group” was assigned: group of people with similar gender and age distributions but without musical experiences in order to become able to detect the possible personality-shaping effects of musical training. Altogether the number of participants of the study was over one thousand, which provides a higher level of reliability and increased power of generalization. As a psychological instrument, they used one of the classic trait-based personality inventories, Cattle’s 16 PF (Personality Factors), which – as it is indicated in its name – describes the normal, everyday functioning of people.²³

Several specific differences were detected. A higher level of aloofness, intellectual attitude and precision characterised the musicians group. In their case there was also an expressed tendency of abstract thinking and emotional, intrapersonal sensitivity. Perfectionism and self-determination were also characteristics of the musicians. Summarizing the findings of the research, Kemp described five main factors of differences between musicians and non-musicians, which are the following:

Good-upbringing, the tendency of accepting authority, complying with the ethical-moral norms or with analytic terms, it describes the strength of the Superego.

Introversion, a general tendency of keeping the interpersonal stimuli inside, the lack of acting out, a relatively high level of blocking behavioural manifestations of psychological contents.

Intelligence, a high level of need for intellectual challenges, to get to know the world around us better, to gain new information by the process of learning irrespectively of its concrete nature.

Pathemy, a high level of tendencies of emotionally sensitive attitudes, a need and intention to understand the feelings of others, to gain affective information from pieces of arts and from interpersonal situations.

Anxiety, a sub-clinical level of intrapersonal agitation, psychological stress and tension, which do not have specific object or reason. Anxiety practically is an intensive and tantalizing feeling of objectless fear, which could lead to even clinical symptomatizing.

²³ Mirmics, 2006. 107.

7. The Changes and Consequences of the Musical Personality

Overviewing our quite long journey along the different aspects of musical personality we have several important consequences that worth to recognize. One of these aspects is the social-worth of the musical profession and musical professionals. In the ancient and prehistoric ages, the social-desirability of the musicians was expressly high, they had a special, high status among their communities – the musicians were prominent and important components of the society with crucial roles and tasks. This position changed in the early modern era and in the middle ages: there were accepted and unacceptable forms of practising music. Those musicians, who belonged to the church had a clear and prospering career-choice with relatively high status in the society (but this do not necessarily mean that their financial circumstances were satisfying as well...). However, those musicians, who were not in connection with the church were seen as possible prophets of the devil, the demonstrators of unethical and immoral attitudes, who used their musical abilities in order to tempt people and divert them from the “right path”. This ambiguous view become psychologically involved in the Freudian approach, where however the duality remained (neurotic repression vs. high quality sublimation), it has lost its negative- or positive tone: it simply became a value-neutral psychic process. The situation is affinitive in the case of the trait theories: we can find on the trait-pool of musicians both positive- (e.g. intelligence) and negative (e.g. anxiety) features. The question of personal adaptivity is quite alike than in the case of social-worth: the practically completely adaptive roles gradually became ambiguous. It is extremely important to detect those negative (maladaptive) tendencies that could be harmful or problematic for the musicians in order to improve their coping skills to make them able to avoid the serious consequences. Although the observed introversion, emotional sensitivity and good upbringing singly in itself actually are not some maladaptive features, but together and completed with anxiety this constellation can forecast a quite negative, maladaptive, neurotic aftermath. Of course, the literature does not want to suggest that the personality structure of musicians in itself will “make” the musicians disordered: the musical personality is a quite unique concept with stronger and vulnerable components as well. The task of the music training programs and the responsibility of the teachers of this area is to detect these vulnerabilities and apply primer prevention: methods that prevent the emergence of psychopathological disorders.

8. Reasons behind the Vulnerability of Musicians to Anxiety: The Secret and Gentle Insecurities

There are several reasons behind the musician's anxiety, and luckily (?) most of them can be identified in social context. Why do we refer to this situation as lucky? We do it, because the social interactions have dynamic nature, which means that we can change them, therefore there are opportunities to apply directed interventions. Let us see the most common reasons which are connected to the anxious symptoms of musicians.

The first and the most well-known type of musician's neurotic problems is the *performance anxiety*.²⁴ Performance anxiety is related to those situations when the person has to present her/his knowledge in a specific field – most of the times in front of (occasionally large group of) other people. Regarding the introverted features of the musician's personality it is easily acceptable, that such an extraverted situation could be pretty frustrating and stressful for them. Naturally an optimal level of stress is not harmful, moreover it could be pretty helpful, because it activates the neural brain activity which contributes to the better quality of performance. The problems are starting when this level of stress becomes too high: in this case the so called „debilitating anxiety“ appears which can set back or even totally block the process of performance (e. g. „meltdown“ during the presentation of a musical piece, or even fainting and losing consciousness). The most important question is: what causes this phenomenon? Generally, the main reason behind performance anxiety is the extremely high self-expectations. The performers stand themselves inaccessible high standards, which are logically un-grantable. Therefore, the musician is in an impossible situation: how can they perform in a quality that is absolutely not possible? As a consequence – irrespectively to the actual quality of their performance – they can only fail: they cannot be good enough for themselves, for their own (impossible) standards. This situation can cause several forms of symptoms: physical (tremor, perspiration, stomach ache, etc.), psychic (tension, intensive fear, disorientation, etc.) and behavioural (crying, agitation, fainting, etc.).

The second big cluster of problems is organized around the concept of *perfectionism*.²⁵ Perfectionism is a general and pervasive tendency of performing in a special (or in some cases in every) situation in an unimaginable and unreachable perfect way. Actually, it can be a positive

²⁴ Bandi 2015. 158.

²⁵ Bandi 2015. 159.

and desirable manner: striving after high performance and trying to improve our skills are respectable tendencies. The problem is that the idealised perfect state is not real: total perfection is physically unreachable. Therefore, the efforts to reach it in its complete form are extremely stressful and slowly „set the person’s teeth on edge”. The important question on perfectionism is the origin of these maladaptive thoughts. A double bond became observable: at first, the musical student has to face with the un-grantable expectations of their teacher (“You are not allowed to miss even one note in the piece! If you do even so, the whole piece is ruined!”). Most of the times this kind of behaviour is based on some kind of deep and hidden (maybe even unconscious) insecurities of the teachers: the easily predictable failure of their students gives them the feedback, that they are still better than them. This is a highly maladaptive strategy and mostly characterise the burnt-out members of the teaching staff. The other form of perfectionism is based on the previously foreshown phenomenon. The excessively high standards presented by the teachers slowly became internalised: not just the teacher expects the impossible – the student even formulate them for themselves! From this point the whole process became a vicious circle: the student will feel that he/she disappoints the teacher and her/himself, which failures and the attached feeling to them just worsen the situation which can easily block even further the performance.

The third, but not less important form of anxiety connected to musical performance is called *social phobia*.²⁶ Social phobia is a form of anxiety disorders which is characterised by intensive fear in those situations where other people are present. In these situations, for people suffering from social phobia it is astonishingly hard and stressful to perform – for example in the case of musicians to play a score. The reasons behind social phobia are diverse, but it is quite feasible that these kinds of problems are connected to the features of performance anxiety: in several cases it is extremely difficult to separate them from each other. Intensive social phobia can even cause fainting in socially saturated situations due to the hyperactivation of the body – with special emphasis on the brain. Regarding the introverted features of the musical personality it is easily imaginable, that how stressful the social situations (concerts, instrument examinations) can be for them. Luckily this type of problems are relatively easily handleably – compared with the previously mentioned malignant perfectionism and performance anxiety.

²⁶ Bandi 2015. 158.

9. Possible Interventions

We cannot emphasise enough the relevance of the early recognition and even more importantly the primary prevention in the case of these maladaptive anxious tendencies. However, personality most of the times is seen as a quite rigid and relatively stable construct, it does not determine in itself one's future and the possible symptomatizing. On the other hand, we cannot neglect the vulnerability encoded into this construct, so an attitude of precautionous attention is fairly required.

Our primary task is to facilitate the improvement of teacher training programs in the aspect of mental-hygienical education. Basic and quite simple exercises can be easily integrated to the tertiary educational system, however up until the present day relatively low number of efforts was made. In Hungary one of these efforts was led by Emőke Bagdy, a famous clinical psychologist, whose name and professional reputation served as an assurance of the program.²⁷ Professor Bagdy's idea was that the introduction of daily physical education classes provides opportunity to teach the children effective but yet easy and playful relaxational techniques in order to give them instruments against the daily stressors. The reactions from the practising teachers and educational professionals were absolutely shocking: the resistance against the idea was so strong that the fully refined program became barely applicated. The reasons behind the opposition were the probable and putative violation of competence-borders and the novelty of the idea – we can easily realize that both groups of the arguments are pretty weak and „narrow-minded”. Against the relative failure of the program mentioned above, for example in the University of Pécs the musical students can participate in relaxational exercises during the psychological courses. According to the preliminary feedbacks, most of the students found these exercises useful and edificatory. We also have to admit: university is far over that educational level where we should have originally started this health-educational intervention.

What kind of interventions could be effective? The answer for this highly important question is dyadic. At first, we have to facilitate adaptive coping strategies with adequate techniques and in the second place we have to reduce the occurrence of maladaptive forms of coping. The adaptive forms of coping consist of relaxational techniques²⁸ (e.g. muscle-contractional and respiration - regulation exercises); meditation²⁹ (e.g. presence

²⁷ Bagdy 2014. 9.

²⁸ Bagdy 2014b. 107.

²⁹ Kabat-Zinn 1994. 1.

consciousness orientated mindfulness meditation); general physical activities (e.g. running, hiking, team-sports, etc.) and ventilation (e.g. writing a diary, speaking about the problems with friends, family, etc.). The non-prescript homeopathic herbal-based dietary supplements also could be effective (e.g. Valeriana-based pills), because they do not develop biological dependence – although the psychological forms of dependence of course could appear (just like in the case of e.g. special physical activities as well). Maladaptive forms of coping are the consumption of alcoholic beverages in order to overwhelm the psychological tensions and the use of prescript anxiolytics without psychological interventions (like counselling and therapy). Both of the above-mentioned methods cause very fast addiction in a biological level, while the alcoholic drinks also could inhibit the performance itself as well, due to its effects on the brain areas regulating the volitional movements. Alcohol consumption also has a huge effect on the general state of health of the whole body-functioning. Also, a maladaptive form of coping is the use of illegal drugs (e.g.: cannabis and hash) in order to reduce the stress level of the body. Besides its illegality, the actual mechanism of action of these agents not clearly known, therefore they could probably contain long-term malignant side-effects. A quite sad and frightening experience coming from several different resources is that in several cases the music teachers themselves advise to their own students the use of different sedatives to decrease performance anxiety before concert.

Beyond the interventions described above, the most important change that we should achieve is laying in a much more fundamental level. Although we know these dangers (the musician's vulnerability to stressful and anxious situations), we know the techniques to treat them (relaxational exercises), somehow the actual interventions are not applied. It has also several complex reasons. The most plausible of them is the intimidating nature of these problems: people who meet with these situations tend to feel ashamed by them and therefore they frequently do not try to find support actively. On the other hand, the society also tries to avoid facing that others suffer from these torturing inner tensions, mostly because it is seen as private issue, and also because they do not see the possible opportunity to help them in any way. This latter argument however is completely wrong: as we know from the extended psychological literature of social support³⁰, any form of help coming from the socially relevant others facilitate the adaptive emotional and behavioural changes. This (well-known) finding also highlights the responsibility of teachers: their double role of teaching and nurturing contains the possible necessity of acting like

³⁰ Cohen and Wills, 1985. 310.

in special cases as „mental-hygienical professionals” and help the students to cope with the anxiety connected to the musical profession. The society of teachers could be also the main basis of the primary prevention: they could help their students to create those adaptive coping strategies that could help them to avoid stress and anxiety. Long and short of it is: the general attitudes towards these problems should change (rapidly) at first.

The findings and possible consequences of musical personality mentioned above of course do not cover the whole field of this phenomenon. There are several other approaches even in the level of psychological description or in the aspect of probable interventions. However, the main aim of this article was not that to give complete and perfect knowledge about this issue: we would like to draw the teaching profession’s attention to the problematic characteristics of being a musician. Music is one of the biggest wonder and the most beautiful invention of humankind: it delights us, it makes us think and serves as a projective canvas for our affections. If it is so beneficent and healthy, why even those have to suffer, who provides us this magic?

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