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Editors

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Faculty of Music, University of Arts in Belgrade



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## Some Remarks on the Performance Anxiety among Musicians: A Psychoanalytic Perspective

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### Abstract

A major impediment to performing musicians is the ambivalence between profound motivation to perform and anxiety connected with the act of performing. This anxiety may even lead to the complete inhibition of performing an activity. Some researchers have observed that roughly one-half of performers of classical music experience a significant problem connected to stage anxiety and depression. Music performance anxiety (MPA) is an outcome of the interplay of many factors, from genetics and environmental stimuli to the individual's experience, emotions, cognition and behavioral habits. What has received much less attention, however, is the unconscious roots of this problem. In the present paper, we shall focus on two generic factors that from the psychoanalytic perspective play a part in the process of generating high levels of MPA: one related to creative regression, the other concerning the affective sphere. Firstly, creative regression is a crucial prerequisite for the quality of musical performance. Since the act of performing involves balancing between regression (primary processes), and high control of memory and motor activity (secondary processes), a split of the ego occurs, with freely floating anxiety that is difficult to master. A second major factor belongs to the affective sphere: performing musicians are presenting to the audience their most vulnerable preverbal self. Reactions of the audience, however, whether positive (hence extremely important for the balance of the healthy narcissistic self), or negative (potentially provoking self-eneffement) cannot be controlled, which constitutes an additional source of anxiety. Some implications of these views relate to the education of prospective creative-productive professional musicians in the domain of the development of cohesive self and ego strength that is able to master the anxiety. This mastery would serve a creative and productive life, instead of leading into symptoms or isolation from the stage.

### Introduction

There is an abundance of proof of the ubiquity of stage fright among professional musicians (Clark, 1989; Fishbein & Middlestadt, 1988; Wesner, Noyes, & Davis, 1990). As for its causes, often mentioned are negative thoughts (Kendrick, Craig, Lawson, & Davidson, 1982; Nagel, Himle, & Papsdoff, 1989; Steptoe, 1989). Just what the origins of these thoughts are, as well as their content, could be the domain of psychoanalytic understanding. There are many musicians who have undergone psychoanalytic treatment. For psychoanalysis, they left many insights into their inner world, in which the stage anxiety was, as a rule, if not a crucial, then a very important obstacle. This paper will only briefly report on the findings that still need to be verified. Since we presume that not all readers will be sufficiently adept in psychoanalysis, we will begin with a brief introduction of the psychoanalytic framework of our explanation.

One of the cornerstones of the psychoanalytic model of mind is its division into two distinctive types of mental processes. One is aimed at external reality, with the functions of perception, logical thinking, memorizing, etc. (Freud, 1911/1958). Such processes are, of course, conscious, and are marked quite differently from unconscious processes that represent internal reality, including fantasy. The unconscious processes are primary, for they lie beneath those that were developed later, and are therefore secondary. The dynamics of these two domains is intensive, and their borders, from the structural point of view, are more or less blurred. At the beginning of mental life, all the processes were unconscious, that is, primary. In the course of

development, they will be, but only to a certain extent, replaced with contacts with reality. This is a normal progression, but the path along which the replacement occurs is not linear. In fact, the progression is, in its turn, replaced with temporary – or lasting – regressions, when the primary processes take over again. This means that the archaic developmental stages are not obliterated: the new ones are built on the foundations of the old.

## Two Faces of Regression

Psychoanalysts make the distinction between pathological and creative regressions. Pathological regression leads to mental illness, while the creative regression that is voluntary and temporary, is a phenomenon frequently occurring in artists and musicians (Knafo, 2002; Kris, 1939, 1950, 1952). This means that they use their fantasy to shape their expressions according to the media of presentation, or domain of art they belong to.

Developmental psychoanalysis conceives of the aforementioned stages in a way presented in Figure 1:

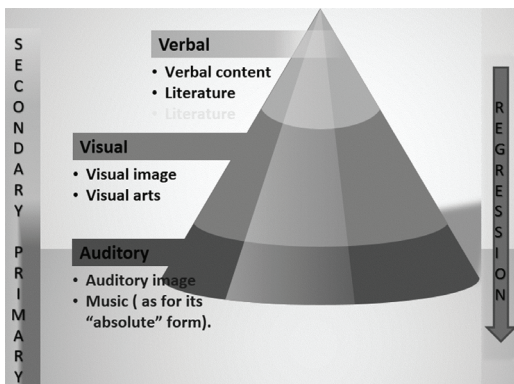


Figure 1. Developmental stages of primary and secondary processes.

At the earliest stages of development and experience, probably before the birth, the auditory sphere was dominant. We can call it the stage of auditory images. Later on, visual imagery will take over, and when the development reaches the stage of acquiring language, the verbal domain will become dominant.

We can say that, when materializing the fantasy, the path of regression is different for literary artists, visual artists and musicians. And we can see that the musician's path to regression is the deepest when compared to the other two, reaching close proximity to primary processes.

Here, however, we may want to learn more about these enigmatic unconscious primary processes. It will transpire that they are not so enigmatic, after all: we encounter them every night when we dream. They store our actual daily experience according to their own laws, or more precisely, they transform them. It took Freud's genius to discover these laws: in dreams, the objects of reality will be displaced, reversed, turned into the opposite; there will be *pars pro toto* representations, micropsia and macropsia, etc. (Freud, 1900/1953; Friedman, 1960).

If a musicologist finds these transformations familiar, it is because music, being developmentally archaic, carries their imprints in virtually all of its aspects, structure, form, thematic procedures and so on. In our previous works, we repeatedly tried to demonstrate these similarities, by comparing musical structures with primary processes of mentalization (Zatkalik & Kontić, 2013, 2015, 2017). We adduced a large number of examples to corroborate this, but nonetheless, for the sake of completeness of this paper, we will provide a very brief overview of how these transformations work, even if it means repeating some of them. The focus is on fragmentation, condensation and turning into the opposite.

Fragmentation seems to be the destiny of most themes, and as a matter of course, these fragments represent themes in development sections, just as parts of objects stand for objects as a whole. The theme may be fragmented in a highly unusual way, as the areas inside rectangles indicate (Figure 2, Mozart, 1878).



Figure 2a. W. A. Mozart: Piano Sonata KV 309, beginning.



Figure 2b. W. A. Mozart: Piano Sonata KV 309, the beginning of the development section.

Even when it seems that we are dealing with the smallest unit, a motif, there is still room for further fragmentation (Figure 3), and the pointillistic texture such as frequently found in the Anton Webern demonstrates how the very tissue of music can break down.



Figure 3. Robert Schumann: *Erster Verlust*.

Condensation affects virtually every aspect of music. Diverse thematic materials can be fused, as in the third movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (Figure 4). The form of this movement is variations on two themes, and the above example reproduces the respective beginnings of the themes. When the first theme reappears in a varied form, we not only recognize its melodic skeleton, we can also see how certain properties of the second theme are grafted onto it, as it were.



Figure 4a. L. v. Beethoven: Ninth Symphony, III movement, the first theme.



Figure 4b. L. v. Beethoven: Ninth Symphony, III movement, the second theme.



Figure 4c. L. v. Beethoven: Ninth Symphony, III movement, a variation on the first theme, with elements of the second.

Certain theoretical models, notably the Schenkerian one, can be viewed in light of condensation. In Figure 5 we can see the deep structure of a typical minor-mode sonata form. The first tonic chord, for instance, condenses all events contained in the first theme and transition. It is not only a manner of graphic presentation: the listener (according to Schenkerians) is expected to conceptualize somehow many lower-level events condensed into a single higher-level one. Polyphony can also be thought of as a kind of condensation, and the ultimate example can be found in György Ligeti's micropolyphony.

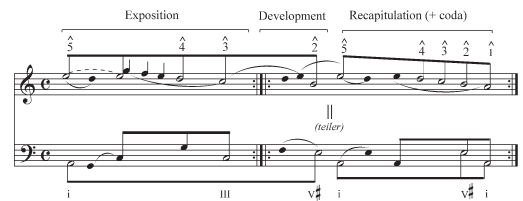


Figure 5. Schenkerian model of sonata form.

Finally, Figure 6 (Haydn, 1985) shows how a typical cadential gesture can also serve as the opening of a piece, thus acquiring the meaning which is its exact opposite.



Figure 6a. J. Haydn: String Quartet Op. 33, No. 2, finale.



Figure 6b. J. Haydn: String Quartet Op. 33, No. 2, finale.

After this extended but – we believe – necessary introduction, we return to the main theme, the stage anxiety of musicians. While performing, they need to divide, to split their self into

one that will leave them at the “mercy” of the primary modes of representation, to regress to the deepest level of the most archaic mental processes, and the other, which simultaneously maintains omnipotent control over the instrument, over their memory, and much more. If the performer applies only secondary processes, the performance will be mechanic, automatic, and not aesthetic enough. If this pendulum swings to the other side, the danger of being overwhelmed by the primary process will increase, and anxiety, as a signal of danger, will unfold. It is the performer’s task to master the tensions that are incorporated in the music he performs, and not his own anxiety, which indeed may paralyze his memory of the text, and the control over the instrument. This obviously means that anxiety of such magnitude exists only in the profession of a musician.

### Narcissistic Issues

Here we may expect a quite natural question: how can we account for the fact that so vast a number of individuals are attracted to such a difficult profession? What gain do they seek to attain? We can say a great deal on the subject of the unconscious motivation of performing musicians, but it is not the subject of the present article. To begin with the description of our second factor responsible for stage anxiety, we shall quote Mozart’s letter to his father from Paris, May 1, 1778: “Give me the best piano in Europe, and listeners who understand nothing, or do not wish to understand, and who do not sympathize with me in what I am playing, I no longer feel any pleasure” (Mozart, W. A., 1769–1791, W. A. Mozart to J. G. L. Mozart, May 1, 1778). We suppose that this statement sounds familiar and easy to understand, but it nonetheless leaves us wondering about the enormous power it ascribes to the audience, even by someone like Mozart, who was at the time of writing those lines, aged twenty. Where does this power come from?

To understand this, we ought to look again at the developmental line, precisely at the stage when the language is acquired. When a human being masters language, it is an outstanding ac-

complishment, maybe one of the most important crossroads of psychical development. On these issues, Daniel Stern, a well-known developmental psychoanalyst, says the following: “But in fact, language is a double-edged sword. It also makes some parts of our experience less shareable with ourselves and with others. It drives a wedge between two simultaneous forms of interpersonal experience: as it is lived and as it is verbally represented” (Stern, 1998: 162, italics ours).

We can state that by music, we emphasize the experience that is lived, which stands below the verbally represented. One another known psychoanalyst from the British independent school of psychoanalysis, Donald Winnicott, speaks about the “true self” and the “false self” (Winnicott, 1955, 1956, 1960, 1971). This division does not imply the category of value or morality. When we experience something, we activate our core, true self, and when we verbally refer to experience, we operate in the domain of the “false self”. The true self needs to be mirrored, confirmed or applauded and such needs are omnipresent throughout one’s life.

We believe that the act of performing music represents in its pure form the exposition of one’s true self for the mirroring of the significant other, precisely the audience. The score written by the composer is, from this point of view, something that is the most intimate, the experience organized as it is lived, and not verbally represented (the idea captured by the expression “absolute music”). It is the true self that is utterly vulnerable, and dependent on the mercy of the audience, which may confirm it, deny it, or – as we saw in Mozart’s letter – ignore it.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, we will outline some recommendations concerning the optimal development of the personality of musicians. The cultivation of the fantasy and free-floating between primary and secondary processes is of marked importance. The ego strength will permit the mastering of performing anxiety, and the proper exposure of the true self of young musician needs to be confirmed by true, and not false



mirroring. The education should not be one-sided, focused solely on musical performance, concerts, competitions, awards, etc. but ought to engage with the development of the personality *in toto*. In a way in which the Ancient Greeks described the personality as the equilateral triangle consisting of μαθηματική, γυμναστική and μουσική (intellect, body, emotion) in harmony.

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