

9. SUCCESSFUL MUSIC PERFORMER'S PERSONALITY TRAITS

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Abstract: *Music-education practice has revealed the fact that, in order to become a successful music performer, not only certain physical and perceptive attributes (such as the amplitude of open palm, thoracic capacity, rhythmic accuracy, musical hearing), but a series of personality traits related to the complexity of social, cognitive and emotional activities associated to music performance are also needed. Scientific research focused on high quality music performers' personality traits has been generated by a series of stereotypes that had been developed across time in the musical world. For example, it has often been said (Woody, 1999) that trumpet players are proud, impetuous, detached and dominating, whereas woodwind players are more feminine, more intelligent and shy. The present study aims to review the most relevant experiments related to the personality profile of the successful music performer. A growing body of research has discovered ten important traits: androgyny, originality, independence, self-motivation, perseverance, sensibility, high capacity of interpersonal communication, extroversion, the need for attention, and trait anxiety. I discuss about a series of educational implications of this personality profile in connection to the development of a successful career in academic music. Discovering and developing these traits early on could be an essential support in creating an exceptional educational path in vocal and instrumental music performance.*

Key words: *personality traits, stereotypes, successful musical career*

1. Introduction

In order to become successful in music performance, there's more it than intensive practice. Not later than 250 years ago, Johann Joachim Quantz, a known German flute player wrote in his book *On playing the flute* some observations regarding the personality profile successful flute player: "...a lively and fiery spirit, united with a soul capable of tender feeling; a good mixture, without too much melancholy, of what scholars call the temperaments; much imagination, inventiveness, judgment and discernment; a good memory; a good and delicate ear; a sharp and quick eye; and a receptive mind that grasps everything quickly and easily" (Quantz, 1752, p. 34).

This description shows that even earlier music experts noticed the importance of personality in having a career in music performance. These personality traits may be as relevant as certain perceptive and physical attributes such finger amplitude, thoracic capacity and musical ear. Nevertheless, one's success in music performance career may be attributed not only to efficiency in performance techniques and personality factors, but also to a complex of needs, reasons and social opportunities that may or not be individually controlled.

2. Performers' personality between stereotype and reality

Investigating the relationship between personality and musical interest in

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children, Martin (1976 *apud* Woody, 1999) has noticed that the students interested in music performance showed extraversion, high adaptability, intelligence and sensitivity. Scientific research on performers personality traits has been generated by a series of stereotypes which developed across time in orchestras or vocal-instrumental ensembles. Musicians tend to judge their peers' personality profile according to the instrument they play. Therefore, the famous performer Wynton Marsalis (Woody, 1999) noticed that the trumpet players are told to be arrogant, impetuous, detached and controlling. Another stereotype is applied to woodwind players which are considered to be more feminine, more intelligent and shy (Woody, 1999). Also, percussionists consider themselves to be more sexual than all other instrumentalists due to the rhythmic nature of their activity (Builione & Lipton, 1983 *apud* Woody, 1999).

But the most frequent stereotype refers to the comparison between brass players and string players (Kemp, 1996; Buttsworth & Smith, 1999; Cribb & Gregory, 1999). The first ones are seen as loud, uneducated, extraverted and rough, while the second ones are considered to be oversensitive and vulnerable and as people who tend to avoid physical activity "in order to not hurt their fingers" (Woody, 1999, p. 50).

3. Successful performers' personality traits

Haller & Courvoisier (2010) have explored the personality differences between a group of students among which 309 were psychology majors, 158 were visual Arts majors and 136 were music majors. They have discovered that the visual arts students are more unstable, more open to experiences and more inclined to heuristic thinking than psychology students. Musicians proved to be more extroverted and more friendly than visual arts students. Musicians were also more inclined to heuristic thinking than psychology students. The two researchers suggest that there is possible to distinguish between the three fields students just by following clues regarding their personality and thinking style.

Regarding the personality of performing art students, Marchant-Haycox & Wilson (1992) have discovered a series of interesting specific traits by applying The Eysenck Personality Profiler to a set of 162 artists. Therefore, actors have shown higher scores regarding extroversion and expressivity. Dancers proved to be more anxious, unhappy, hypochondriacs and with lower self-esteem. Musicians situated between actors and dancers regarding most personality traits. Trait anxiety has been found in one third of actors and dancers and in half of musicians. A high incidence of depression (38%) has been noticed among dancers. Researchers have explained these findings as a consequence of the unstable, risky and demanding lifestyle of those who work in the performing arts fields.

The musical field includes distinct artistic directions such as composition, musicology, conducting, music performance and music education. A comparative study led on music teachers and music performers (Wubbenhorst, 1994) discovered no differences between the two groups by applying Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI).

Research (Wubbenhorst, 1994; Kemp, 1996; Hassler et al, 1985 *apud*

Woody, 1999) on classical music performers have highlighted a series of specific personality traits that describe a coherent personality profile. A first specific trait refers to a high level of **androgyny** among classical music performers. Androgyny has been defined (Woody, 1999) as the trait where the person gains equally feminine and masculine features that allows the adaptation to the cognitive and emotional style of both genders. Androgyny has previously been associated to creativity and researchers explain the presence of this trait among musicians through the fact that music performance elicits high levels of originality. Despite the high technical precision occurred in classical music performance, exceptional soloists are extremely original in the expression dimension, especially due to the fact that, in order to stand out among their peers, have to find always a new way of performing a score played by millions of soloists before them.

Bloom (1985 *apud* Sternberg, 2005) says that the final phase of preparing music performers consists in the guidance of a maestro-teacher which, in most cases, is an international well-known performer. These maestros accept to do masterclasses only with well-gifted young music performers. Bloom noticed that, for example in the case of pianists, the masterclasses are focused not on the technical dimension but on developing a personal and unique way to communicate emotion through music. Therefore, while each young music performer finds his own way of expressing his ideas through performance, his creativity is highly requested and developed.

Kemp (1996) and Alter (1989) noticed that music performers are also very **independent**, as they have a great capacity of self-motivation proven across thousands of hours on individual instrumental study. Kemp call them “bold introvert”, as they have the capacity to feel comfortable in solitude across long periods of independent study, but also to courageously perform in front big crowds.

Ericsson and collaborators (1993 *apud* Sternberg, 2005) have studied **perseverance** in violinists of different levels of virtuosity. They have noticed that deliberate practice is one of the most important factors in gaining an international career, as the best violinists accumulated more than 10 000 hours of individual instrumental study up to the age of 20 years old. By analyzing the length of deliberate practice sessions and rest program, researchers found that the most successful violinists practiced very close to the upper limit of supportability.

Due to the fact music performers are always in the eyes of the public and find themselves often being evaluated, they tend to develop a certain level of **sensibility** that may lead to intolerance towards themselves, lack of emotional balance, low self-esteem or depression (Kemp, 1996; Woody, 1999). The term sensibility has been used in relation to music performers as having multiple meanings. First of all, it indicates high level of perceptive auditory skills such as the capacity to hear soft auditory stimuli. Secondly, Carl Seashore (1937) talked about “musicians’ sensory capacities” (p. 2) related to the ability to distinguish sounds’ pitch, timbre, harmony and duration in complex musical conglomerates. Thirdly, music performers’ sensibility may also represent their high level of empathy and emotional subtlety expressed in the music they play. Lastly,

performers' sensibility is their tendency to be vulnerable and easily hurt or offended. This complex definition of sensibility shows the diversity of social and emotional activities of music performers.

Music is communication between performers and the public therefore musicians develop high **communicative skills** which imply mutual understanding based on empathy and respect towards people. Referring to the maestros that conduct masterclasses for young performers, Lawrence (1977 *apud* Woody, 1999, p. 245) noticed that: "great teachers demonstrate great personality qualities that represent more than the sum of their performance talent and didactic abilities". Their attitudes always showed warmth, careful listening, patience, generosity, perseverance in research, logical assessment and reflection.

One personality trait that hasn't yet been unanimously accepted is related to introversion-extraversion. Some studies (Kemp, 1996; Haller & Courvoisier, 2010; Cribb & Gregory, 1999) found musicians to be more **extraverted** than non-musicians, others (Marchant-Haycox & Wilson, 1992) didn't agree with that. This contradiction may be due to the diversity of genres music performers approach and of the cultural contexts they have to perform.

Alter (1989 *apud* Woody, 1999) compared a group of musicians to a control group of non-musicians and discovered a higher **need for attention** in the first one. The author explains this finding through the frequency musicians are in the center of others' attention as they are often on stage and in evaluative situations.

Trait anxiety is another personality that had been attributed to musicians. Trait and state anxiety is a common problem among music performers due to the frequent assessment they go through their entire career, and since an early age.

4. Differences in personality related to musical instrument

Kemp (1996 *apud* Parncutt & McPherson, 2002, p.11) noticed certain correlations between performers' personality profile and the choice of musical instrument: "string playing may frequently attract the quieter, more introverted and studious child, whereas brass playing may appeal to the more socially outgoing and extroverted. Singers also tend to be more extroverted, sensitive and imaginative types. Keyboard player tend to be more extroverted but not as extroverted as the brass players and singers. Clearly, the kinds of demands that instruments make on the learner, particularly in terms of the relative ease with which reasonably pleasing sounds can be produced in the early stages, will help determine whether the beginner will persevere or, in time, discontinue instruction."

In order to investigate the stereotypes related to the specificity of music performers' personality profile according to the instruments they play, two studies (Buttsworth & Smith, 1999; Cribb & Gregory, 1999) used 16PF and EPI on different instrumentalists. They discovered that brass players are more suspicious, more imaginative and more creative than vocalists, and more extroverted and more creative than string players. Moreover, pianists proved to be more emotional stable, warmer and smarter than all other four categories (strings, woodwind, brass and vocalists). Also, strings players recorded higher levels of neurozism.

Woody (1999) made the observation that most researchers focused on classical music performers and that jazz, folk, country, pop and rock performers are often neglected. These categories are also the object of stereotyping, and on frequent stereotype relates rock music performers with pathological personality traits. Gillespie (2000) applied NEO-PI-R to 100 rock music performers and found high levels of neurozism, openness to experience and extraversion. He also discovered that rock musicians are less agreeable and with lower level of conscientiousness.

Rankin (2005) empirically confirmed that rock performers are unfairly labeled as pathological, as he found normal traits among this category. Nevertheless, Vuust *et al* (2010) discovered a higher need for strong sensation seeking in music performers from “rhythmic” genres in comparison to classical music performers.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, we have to take into account that there is a specific personality profile of music performers, in comparison to other professional categories. Moreover, this profile is also directed by the choice of musical instrument, as different instrumental categories may lead to the development of certain personality traits.

Therefore, we can say with certainty that the old stereotypes that have traveled among musicians across time have finally been demonstrated. There are educational implications to these findings, as a proper career orientation towards certain musical instruments should take into account the specific personality traits that have been associated to specific instrumental categories.

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