Emotional Health Issues in Professional Classical Musicians

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ABSTRACT – The professional classical musician experiences a close and often inseparable relationship between his personal and professional life. This is because artistic performance requires strong emotional involvement, an intense psychological process and constant physical commitment. In addition to artistic training, musicians implicitly acquire several organizational roles that affect their mental health, which leads to an emotional imbalance. Musicians experience music performance anxiety, depression, and other worrisome conditions that are on the rise. These conditions are associated with stress, fear of failure and perfectionism. As most musicians are not familiar with means and techniques to help them cope with problems, prevention methods are recommended. Also, identifying and understanding the risk factors would help raise awareness about the conditions to which they are prone. Studies have shown that the beneficial methods include resilience, mindfulness and positive psychology, which, unlike the traditional deficit-oriented psychology, focus on the present moments and the positive aspects of the human being.

Keywords: professional classical musicians, well-being, anxiety, music performance, resilience, positive psychology.

1 Emotional Health

Emotional health encompasses our thoughts, emotions, and the way we manage them in various everyday situations. It is about our sense of well-being, our ability to cope with life’s events, challenges and uncertainties, but also about how we recognize our own emotions and those of others, from the desire to live a balanced life.

Although one might think that the concern for the well-being of the individual is a concept that has evolved over the last two decades, due to the visibility received, the development of the concept of well-being is grounded in the values of the Greek philosophers, who talked about happiness, meaning and virtues. Officially, the term wellbeing was first introduced by the World Health Organization in 1948: “Well-being encompasses quality of life, as well as the ability of people and societies to contribute to the world in accordance with a sense of meaning and purpose. Focusing on well-being supports the tracking of the equitable distribution of resources, overall thriving, and sustainability.”

The literature of the last decades has been closely concerned with emotional well-being, from the perspective of one’s own ability to produce positive emotions and states: “Wellness is the complete integration of body, mind, and spirit – the realization that everything we do, think, feel, and believe has an effect on our state of well-being.”

The absence of anger, sadness, frustration or anxiety does not necessarily represent a healthy emotional life, but, rather, the way we manage to cope with them and with the triggering situations represents a healthy emotional balance. Thus, emotional health and, implicitly, well-being frame the need for self-knowledge, with which you can prevent and manage, but also share situations that trigger undesirable states.

Regarded as one of the oldest forms of sharing inner states, music defines cultures around the world. Through its various functions, forms and structures, music contributes to the definition of society, to social connection, interaction and inclusion, as well as to the health and well-being of the population.

People perceptually interact with music from the prenatal stage, listening from the moment hearing is formed. Later, it also takes on the role of expressing creativity through composition and actively playing an instrument or vocal singing. The benefits of music in everyday life are measured, among others, in relation to language, communication and social development, as well as to the reduction of stress and emotional expression. Music can be used as therapy in a music-therapeutic context, or, as it is most frequently used – instinctively. In everyday life,

1 Health Promotion Glossary of Terms 2021, 10.
music is often associated with an oasis of peace and relaxation, a booster of energy and good mood, or a process of artistic expression.

For those who choose music not only as a source of relaxation and joy, but also as their professional career, the positive effects of music slip into the background. Thus, the working method is music itself. This journey is most often associated with a fragile state of mind, and with countless uncertainties and anxieties related to artistic performance. The studies analysing the health issues of professional classical musicians have taken into account economic, social and personal factors. These factors have revealed disturbing evidence of the mental and emotional destructiveness behind a musical career and presented evidence that “both resilience and physical health might serve as protective factors against these mental health issues.”

1.1. Health Issues and Causes

Academic music history documents the lives of many instrumentalists and composers suffering from emotional imbalances, whether diagnosed or not. Ludwig van Beethoven, Robert Schumann, Pyotr Il’yich Tchaikovsky, Serge Rachmaninoff, Hector Berlioz, Mikhail Glinka and Anton Bruckner are just a few of the musicians who showed a mental and emotional vulnerability that they mentioned in their journals and letters.

In human life, music is integrated from the prenatal stage. Along the way, music occupies an artistic-creative place in the educational, recreational, community and therapeutic space.

In contrast to the therapeutic effects of music, which contribute to well-being, as mentioned in the biblical writings, and with musical development, which has a cognitive, social and emotional benefits, those who study and want a career in music often experience a deterioration in their well-being. However, the attention of the media and of the specialized research focuses on the impact of music on the listener and on the entire experience of music perception, rather than on the person who produces or performs it.

Professional musicians, from music university students to employees or freelancers, represent a segment of the population at risk of suffering from mental health problems more frequently and increasingly compared to people in other professions. The largest survey dedicated to professional musicians was completed by 2211 participants, of whom 71% are affected by performance anxiety, but also by eating disorders, high levels of stress and musculoskeletal disorders, all of which negatively influence the existence and, implicitly, the playing of the instrument. The causes are multiple, and at the heart of the challenges, mental stress and future-related uncertainties often lies the difficulty of separating the professional from the personal. This is influenced by the high emotional involvement required in the artistic performance.

2 The Process of Artistic Training

The transition from high school to higher education is a threshold that brings about major changes in the musician’s life. Compared to professional musicians who already have stable jobs, music students report more specific symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Instrument specialization starts at an early age and is intense, becoming a lifestyle for the student who is, in most cases, closely accompanied by the instrument teacher. The literature dedicated to professional musicians makes little or no reference to the intense relationship that develops between the instrument teacher and the student over the years.

Musicians report elements of co-dependence, control, and lack of boundaries outside of instrument classes. Topics related to personal life are often debated and analysed, becoming potential negative elements that trigger reactions from teachers, which could be interpreted as possessive. The instrument teacher is not only a pedagogue and a musical mentor, but also an authority involved in the structure of the student’s daily life. The instrument teacher often takes on the task of finding and promoting the motivation for intense study. The student, in reaction to the high demands and expectations, risks developing feelings of weakness and anxiety, for fear of disappointing. Later, when the relationship ends, moments of uncertainty arise in the musician’s life, as he has to be responsible, learn to organize himself and nurture his motivation.

High-level musical training requires complex skills and qualities, from endurance, concentration, memory and physical, visual and auditory coordination, to sensitivity, emotional communication, creativity and imagination.

In the world of professional musicians, careers and stage performances are subjected to comparative analysis, which increases competition as well as the level of mental stress. The competitive spirit, the frequent exposure to exams and contests, and the intensity of self-assessments trigger a tendency for perfectionism leading to the onset of anxiety. Risk factors are primarily identified in the gender categories, with women being, as research shows,

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3 Kegelaers, Schuijer and Oudejans, “Resilience and Mental Health Issues in Classical Musicians”.
more affected than men. The most significant outbreaks of emotional disorders related to music performance occur during puberty and are later intensified by the pressure caused by job competitions.

Life and professional experience seem to positively influence the attitude towards artistic challenges, therefore older musicians show a low percentage of mental and/or emotional disorders related to their music-related professions and activities. Achieving artistic performance takes years of dedication, commitment and sacrifice, both on a social and personal level. Researchers refer to talent development in arts and sports as a lengthy and demanding process that can only take place in a learning environment that fosters motivation and inspiration. These factors are influenced by traditions and culture, as well as by the specific mentality of a country.

The impact of social media on musicians’ well-being is often also negative, contributing to the increase of the moments of uncertainty and of weighing their achievements against the successes presented on social platforms. Networking is also important for musicians, contributing to information, socialization, collaboration and promotion possibilities.

The motivational process must be guided and supported by teachers and trainers specialized in problems specific to musicians. Every student and artist in training should be encouraged to engage in self-exploration processes, which should be reflected in feedback and boost their self-esteem. Personal sacrifice, consisting mainly of the large number of hours dedicated to the study of the instrument in search of technical and interpretive perfection, has an adverse effect on mental health. The consequences of isolation during study hours in tiring and uncomfortable positions can include musculoskeletal disorders, muscle overload, or nodules on the vocal cords. Physical pain and hearing problems are also associated with an increased risk of symptoms of depression and anxiety, substance use, or even personality disorders.

Although musicians exhibit symptoms of emotional disorders such as phobia or depression, most studies to date have focused on music-specific disorders, such as pressure from the desire to reach higher performance levels and music performance anxiety. The awareness that psychosocial factors also play an important role in the negative emotional manifestations of musicians has led to more complex studies that emphasize the importance of aspects related to financial stability, family balance, musical-interpretive authenticity and commercial compromises.

The mental health disorders recorded in studies in recent years show an increasing prevalence of anxiety and depression symptoms. Although studies in this direction are still limited, the higher education level is associated with a tendency towards higher psychological and psychosocial demands, which can contribute to destabilizing mental health conditions. This is potentially due to the fact that “higher education is accompanied by a number of additional psychological (e.g., academic concerns, professional uncertainty) and psychosocial demands (e.g., separation from home, new friend groups).”

In the case of musicians, social and geographical factors play an important role, as many leave their hometowns sometimes from the time they enter high school, having to adapt to a new environment, a new music mentor, a new circle of friends and new food and resting conditions.

Non-classical musicians also experience high rates of depression, anxiety and alcohol consumption. Naturally, musicians avoid concerts and fear them when they suffer from music performance anxiety. When performing, musicians experience physiological symptoms of stress, such as increased heart rate, sweating or cold hands, behavioural symptoms, as well as playing bad notes and emotional symptoms, which lead to long-term distress and insecurity.

A recent study of classical and non-classical musicians found that “mental wellbeing was poorer in musicians who viewed music as their main career,” depending on their success and whether they acted as soloists or lead artists. Thus, musicians who work solo or have major functions scored higher on tests of depression and anxiety than other musicians, as well as a decrease in emotional well-being.

Before seeking help, musicians often resort to beta blockers as an intervention to reduce anxiety before and during concerts, although many of them are aware that drugs cannot solve the cause of their symptoms and that there is a risk that they will also experience the side effects of beta-blockers (such as Propanolol), including tiredness, dizziness, cold fingers and toes, impaired sleep quality and dry mouth.

### 3.1. Prevention and Treatment

The strongest recommendation is the power of prevention. A basic understanding of mental health and of some notions of self-reflection and personal development can contribute to a balanced path, even in difficult situations.

Professional musicians should undergo training on the importance of self-knowledge and well-being promotion to be able to use different strategies for managing stress, anxiety and motivation.

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5 Haraldsen et al., “Thriving, Striving, or Just Surviving?”, 109.
6 Kegelaers, Schuier and Oudejans, “Resilience and Mental Health Issues in Classical Musicians”, 1279.
7 Loveday, Musgrave and Gross. “Predicting Anxiety, Depression, and Wellbeing in Professional and Nonprofessional Musicians”, 517.

*Musicology Papers* 37, no. 2 (2022)
Aside from beneficial methods for treating anxiety in musicians such as occupational therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy, studies in recent years encourage the use of specific interventions for emotional well-being: the mindfulness technique, internal state awareness, resilience, and positive psychology applications.

### 3.2. Positive Psychology and Its Impact on Musicians

Eliminating the negative symptoms associated with artistic performance does not by itself bring about automatic changes in the musician’s state of mind or general well-being. Psychotherapy methods focus largely on human flaws, overcoming deficiencies, accepting failures, and processing trauma. However, most musicians are aware of the impact that a successful concert or inner fulfilment can have upon completion of a long-worked repertoire, which is why the accumulation of positive experiences contributes to reducing the anxiety associated with stage performance. In this case, a process of self-reflection is needed to recognize the factors that contributed to obtaining a positive musical experience.

Positive psychology, a branch of psychology that has developed strongly over the past twenty years, focuses on preventive methods, and understanding positive emotions and human potential. While disregarding the presence of a mental illness or stress factors, positive psychology, a term first coined in 1954 by Maslow, one of the founders of humanistic psychology, seeks to focus on the human abilities and strengths.

Focusing on well-being, enthusiasm, the pursuit of happiness, and the search for meaning in life, positive psychology places emphasis on “exploring what makes life worth living and building the enabling conditions of a life worth living,” guiding people to discover their talents and strengths. The shift from a negative perspective to a positive one not only improves the quality of life but also saves the energy consumed in the desire to repair and change behaviours and defects.

Positive psychology aims at more than short-lived results, pursuing a long-term flourishing evolution, as well as the aspiration for the continuous development of human potential.

To raise awareness of the factors that positively influence well-being, psychologist Martin Seligman, the “father” of positive psychology, developed a model for framing and tracking these factors, called PERMA. The components of the model include five factors for a better life: the sense of feeling good (positive emotions), development of one’s own powers (commitment), the opportunity for authentic connection (relationship), the chance to make a meaningful change (meaning), and the ability to achieve things that matter (fulfillment/achievement). This concept can be the basis of personal well-being and satisfaction, and a very good way to activate motivation and leave stagnation in times of need.

The application of this model stimulates self-discovery and understanding of the life principles that define a person’s functioning in the social context. The elements that an artist needs in order to be able to evolve and perform must include creativity, curiosity, inspiration, and passion for learning and experimentation, all contributing to the development of broader horizons, anchored in the self.

A successful music performance is the result of a lifestyle that includes physical and mental self-care. The methods used in the process of studying an instrument should be applied with intention and awareness: high concentration, attention, emotional involvement and bodily and auditory perception, a thorough knowledge of the score and stylistic elements, as well as reflection processes following the study session or the completion of the stage performance. At the same time, the optimal level of specific excitement, which activates blood circulation, is reached when the musician is in the moment of flow, which involves both attention and concentration. This confirms the fact that “the higher the overall engagement with music, the more intense the experienced flow.”

### 3.3. Resilience

A number of factors discovered by researchers promote the development of resilience in professional musicians, encouraging studies in this direction. The positive results about the effects of resilience are drawn from studies and articles from various fields, such as sports psychology and visual arts.

The American Psychological Association defines resilience as the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult, traumatic, or challenging life experiences, in difficult situations causing stress and existential (e. g. financial) hardships. This adaptation occurs mainly through mental, emotional and behavioural flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands. It is believed that resilience can be practised if applied frequently in demanding situations or following failures, making recovery and development processes more efficient through a strategic adaptation of the self.

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8 Seligman, Flourish.

Musicology Papers 37, no. 2 (2022)
Building resilience also means challenging the mind by training psychological skills that help detect the negative effects of stress and the harmful thoughts caused by them. The process of resilience means not only achieving recovery but also the personal development that comes with it.

The development of psychological skills is aimed at reducing anxiety, by using concrete work interventions: setting a goal, relaxation techniques and visualization techniques. This structure can shape the study process in an effective way. Resilience training creates an awareness of the fact that various personal, professional and social aspects of life can be controlled, modified and led towards a process of evolution so that social and emotional well-being improves and increases.

Resilience can be seen as a muscle that develops through perseverance and intention, not with the aim of cancelling out the existence of the states of fear and anxiety, but with the aim of being able to cope with them.

At the heart of resilience are four basic elements: connection, well-being, healthy thinking and meaning. Prioritizing friendship and family relationships doses the energy and invests it in valuable connections, in a circle of close people that provide stability, trust, support and a sense of belonging. Consistent self-care means contributing to the physical, mental and emotional well-being. Given that stress and anxiety affect our well-being on all levels, conscious self-care through healthy eating, hydration, rest and regular exercise is needed.

It has been proven that both resilience and physical health could serve as protective factors against depression and anxiety symptoms. Moreover, mindfulness practices, yoga, meditation, prayer, or keeping a journal are also considered factors that contribute to strengthening resilience. They are chosen according to the personality of each individual. It is important that an exploration process takes place, which answers the question: what relaxation practice is good for me? These practices foster positive thinking and gratitude and drive out negative thoughts.

Finding meaning in the study of the instrument and planning artistic activities contribute to a clearer direction towards what is desired to be achieved. Setting realistic goals in the study process makes it easier to achieve the goal (for example: completing a musical piece). Also, focusing on achievable tasks helps to make the process clear and to use time effectively (for example: how much time do I have and what can I do during this time?).

Conclusions

The emotional health of the professional classical musician can be maintained through preventive methods of information, support and training. While every human being has weaknesses and flaws, it is important that the focus should also be on the personal strengths and positive qualities.

The prevention programs for musicians, developed in the last decades and used in schools and universities, have implemented subjects that combine psychological education, seminars on managing one’s own emotions before and after the artistic performance, relaxation techniques, stage position and physical exercises.

A healthy emotional life means the ability to integrate elements of resilience, positive psychology and mindfulness, to view things from both inner and outer perspectives, to remove irrational and catastrophic thoughts, and to accept change as a constant of life.

Maintaining healthy thinking requires constantly working towards a healthy lifestyle on all levels: physical, psychological and emotional. Optimism, acceptance, trust and gratitude are essential aspects of well-being and a balanced life.

Bibliography


10 Kegelaers, Schuijer and Oudejans, “Resilience and Mental Health Issues in Classical Musicians”.

Musicology Papers 37, no. 2 (2022)


*Translated from Romanian by Marcella Magda*