

From a psychoanalyst to my fellow violinists (and violists, cellists, and more...)

Anxiety about playing in public - First part

I have had the privilege of being the analyst to numerous fellow violinists, cellists, pianists, clarinetists, music critics, and other professionals devoted to music, both classical and other genres. In fact, every genre.

One of my violinist patients is myself. I know very well what kind of trouble one can get into, how one is, what abysses one can fall into, what discomforts, contortions, obsessions, physical damage, fierce anxieties...So I feel the need to help, to bring relief to violinists in particular, because I recognize myself in them from the tender age of 5.

I entered the Conservatory, precisely, at age 5 and left when I was 18, only to re-enter it for other reasons (an 8th grade degree in composition and electronic music studies). For the Italians reading me, I followed the so-called "vecchio ordinamento" cycle of studies, that is, 10 years of coursework for the instrument. An eternity. In 10 years one becomes a highly skilled nuclear physicist, capable of operating an atomic power plant. But skilled violinists, no. One did not become one. As soon as you graduated, after 10 years of hell, you had to take master classes, and you struggled to read at first sight, even if you could play a Paganini Capriccio decently. A comical situation, with dramatic implications. Today it is not much better; in fact, in some ways it is even worse. But this is not the topic I want to deal with.

I will therefore deal with the anxiety of playing in public.

Let's divide the problem into 3 parts: from the perspective of the micro - system (me and my inner world, my inner universe), meso - system (me and my family of origin in an extended sense, up to the third generation before me) and macro - system, that is, the musical institutions, their location in the country where I live, the economic situation, the historical moment. The three levels interact and form a complexity. Properly understanding one's audience anxiety is not an easy thing. Anyone who simplifies the problem will not achieve any practical results.

Micro system

I will be schematic for the sake of brevity. When I play an instrument, I have an emotional relationship with it. The nature of this relationship goes back to the earliest times of my psychic development, dating from prenatal life to the third (or so) year of age. This is the time when nonverbal communication systems, based on gaze, tone of voice (frequency, timbre, prosody), touch and smell, prevail (absolutely before the first year of age). As infants we are extremely active and use sophisticated means of communication using channels that are, precisely, nonverbal, but no less rich and differentiated. An infant who is only a few months old communicates and perceives every slightest change in mood, in the state of mind of his mother (or at any rate of his caregiver) and reacts by communicating his internal state, in search of a necessary homeostatic balance. Our minds and brains are literally shaped by these primary relationships, which are eminently affective in nature. Endless are the nuances and possibilities. Gradually, communication patterns proper to that specific mother-child pair there emerge. If I have a sad and depressed mother, I will absorb any sadness and react in my own way, for example, by taking care of her. Young children are extraordinary therapists. In this case, any personal needs of mine will be put aside: for example, I might decide thus, "I can't bother mother with my needs, she might be sick and go away." Again, as

you might imagine, the possibilities are really numerous. But if something has gone wrong (this is extremely common) my original self will be afraid of the world. Playing in public, a condition where a well-grounded and stable self is needed, will be cause for unbearable alarm at times. My spontaneous creativity will always be kept at bay, and I may become one of those violinists who hit all the right notes but communicate nothing, and who must have paroxysmal control of technique to play in public.

To summarize: the relationship with the instrument traces the affective patterns that were deposited between me (during the very early years of life) and my caregiver (often the registry mother, but it may be the grandmother, or other relative. It depends on personal history). The instrument is never a thing, an object, but a real person (not just an extension of the body, note!) with whom I have an inner dialogue that traces that with the caregiver from conception to the third year of life. Of all this, almost always, I am in no way conscious.

Entrenched forms of acute anxiety (distress) about playing in public date back to this developmental period. They can only be resolved with good psychotherapy. If they are dealt with in a purely cognitive and non-affective way, they turn the musician (at best) into an efficient automaton, or into a frustrated person who, sooner or later, will change jobs or fall ill with mental and physical illnesses (autoimmune diseases, musculoskeletal problems...).

From the third year of life, moreover, the moral conscience is "solidified," the inner judge that will accompany me throughout my life. In some cases a character comes to life, purely "mental," which grows as a kind of dictator, sometimes fierce and demanding. In many musicians he is just like that: a very bad, never content, sneering, even sadistic internal judge (psychoanalysts call him Super Ego). Camouflaged and powerful, like a kind of inner secret service, it insinuates its judgments into the conscious thoughts of the unfortunate host and makes them seem to be produced by the host itself, not the parasite. "You are worthless! Everything you do is worthless!" it screams inside. Mortifier of all creative freedom, the internal judge, when he takes over the territory of music, will resemble an out-of-control conductor. Try listening (for the English-speaking reader, it will be enough to perceive the character's tone of voice):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cxh-o9ENW5o>

Imagine having such a fellow inside you all the time while you play. A great number of violinists spend their lives trying to satisfy their Inner Musical Judge without realizing that it is a vain work. The origin of the Inner Dictator (the sadistic Super Ego, in psychoanalytic terms) is complex. Often with transgenerational roots, it may arise in the musician who has assumed the function of the one (she) who must redeem mother, father or the entire family, for example, from conditions of severe material hardship, or erase, through the compensatory effect of his or her fame, the suffering derived from historical tragedies, bereavements, emotional traumas.

A second source of acute anxiety is precisely the presence in one's psychic life of this mortifying entity, which in the presence of the public becomes furious, causing incurable technical insecurity. One can spend hours and hours on a step that doesn't come, only to get it wrong in public and feel oneself sinking underground. It is not that difficult to get rid of it, and it is always a good idea to do so.

The third cause of acute public anxiety is related to the presence in us of the eyed group that dwells in the Ancestor Gallery (in psychoanalytic terms, the Ego Ideal). Imagine that you have in you a pantheon, composed of austere, noble, famous, hard-working, family-idealized, important, mythologized characters of great social success or moral stature, perhaps musicians, or successful professionals. Imagine further that you will have to represent their moral legacy: you will have to be

serious, relentless, perfect, equal to their rank. They, from your own inner world, will be watching you, stern.

In musicians the Ancestor Gallery occupies the function of the Musical Ideal, which, for example, is found in terrible schumannian writings. They have probably been propounded to many of you as rules of life (some musicians have swallowed them themselves, as I did as an 18-year-old):

1°) The study of the score is not an operation to be done in company. The more you study the score alone, the more willingly it will reveal its secrets to you.

2°) If you have to listen to an opera for the first time, leave the score at home: perhaps it would only disturb you.

3°) If you play an instrument, try to perfect yourself in it as much as your time and its time allow. The "musician without an instrument" is the most hostile condition to art in the modern era.

4°) Try - as soon as you have overcome of the piano the most bitter technical difficulties - to play also the orchestral scores. You will have more incitement and joy from it than you can suppose.

5°) The most important ability that must be developed in you from reading the scores is that of mentally representing the sound (inner ear). Try to render a sound with as much intensity as possible, and check the accuracy of your sound image by listening with the score in your hand.

6°) If, following the orchestral performance, you have lost the thread and cannot immediately find it again, do not flick through the score, but rather close it, and just listen.

7°) Flicking through noisily is not permissible even for the conductor.

8°) The exercises of conducting are, at home, an innocent and useful amusement! But beating time, at the concert, with the head, foot or other parts of the body is as useless as importunate, as is humming the melody one hears. The listener who is truly moved and taken aback is silent and unmoved.

9°) Have respect for every master and every masterpiece. Detecting mends is not art.

9°) Have respect for every master and every masterpiece. Detecting mends is not art: but myopia and pedantry.

10°) Listening to music is like a ritual. If you are not prepared for it, rather stay at home.

This, besides being trivial, is pompous, suffocating. Those who live in worship, sometimes unconsciously, of this polyphonic psychic entity, the Ancestor Gallery, always feel lacking, trudging, shy and awkward in public.

In summary, there are three main sources of anxiety in the micro - system of the musician's inner life: insecure attachment patterns in the very early years of life, the presence of an out-of-control sadistic Super Ego, and the invasion of one's inner world by a super - moral Ego Ideal. And, since in our delicate psychic structure we don't miss a thing, the three elements can be mixed in endless, original ways.