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The Varied Socio-Emotional Experiences of Music School Students

Introduction

Learning at a music school entails a number of diverse experiences that may have a positive or negative impact on the personal development and artistic achievements of musically talented children and young people. Musical education provides the student with a whole range of feelings from euphoria, joy and great satisfaction to the feeling of defeat, personal failure, and even deep sorrow. All these emotions are associated with successes or failures related to studying music. In addition, students of music schools, apart from going through developmental crises typical for their age, experience numerous challenging situations and difficulties that require coping skills whose mastery can be a factor leading to high artistic achievements. Therefore musical achievements are not subject only to the level of creative talents and musical abilities, but to a large extent depend on:

1) motivational factors, determining efficient practicing on the instrument, despite failures that are sometimes suffered;
2) psychological resilience and strategies for coping with stage fright during exams and any public performances;
3) beneficial relationships with teachers, and especially with the main subject teacher;
4) friendly working relationships with their peers;
5) experiencing a sense of support and understanding from their loved ones.

The present article describes specific socio-emotional experiences related to the learning of children and youth in music schools, taking into account the perspective of their artistic achievements. The article presents a review of situations constituting difficult challenges experienced by students at various stages of their artistic development. The significance of the master-pupil relationship is outlined providing the basis for a child's successful education at a music school and for the realization of his or her artistic talent. The importance of regular practicing and motivating as a condition for achieving perfection in playing an instrument

is underlined. The phenomenon of stage fright, which is an integral part of public appearances at all stages of musical education and career, is presented. Stage fright might at times play a positive role in our lives, but it can also paralyze performers. The articles discusses the problem of peer rivalry that develops among students because of the inevitable social comparisons related to performance. Rivalry can play a constructive or destructive role in music performance. The teacher's pedagogical mastery lies in designing creative competition that fosters a spirit of collaboration among artists.

Challenges for Music School Students

Learning in a music school requires meeting dual requirements. On the one hand, students work to obtain general education and fulfill everyday life duties, while functioning in various social roles. On the other hand, they are obliged to be conscientious, thorough and systematic in their implementation of the requirements of professional musical education, while they work on developing their musical abilities and broadening their competencies. Thus the life of music school students is very intensive, burdened with many responsibilities, regimented, and fully controlled. Unfortunately, the students of music schools experience an excess of numerous difficult challenges that may arise not only from the very process of education but also are the result of rapid socio-economic and civilizational changes. The lack of life stability and weakened sense of security occurring nowadays, as well as the decay of interpersonal relationships and disregard for spiritual values, information overload and the ubiquitous rivalry and also the often unhealthy competition, may adversely affect the psychosocial and musical development of young people (cf. Ledzińska, 2009; Gluska, 2010).

Psychologists employed in artistic schools have studied the educational experiences and life challenges confronted by music school students. The findings have created taxonomies of problems frequently experienced by musically talented children and young people. However, the multiplicity and diversity of such challenges render the creation of a unified taxonomy of difficulties very hard. Psychologists employed in these schools make their own attempts to categorize the problematic situations of children and adolescents based on the experience from their own counseling practice.

The most important categories of difficulties experienced by music school students include:
1) specific difficulties related to the learning of music that result from the requirements of artistic development, among which there are:

    a) deficiencies and disproportions in the development of some specifically musical abilities (Statkiewicz, 1985), including the abilities of music reception, the abilities to perform music and sensitivity to music (Manturzewska, after: Lewandowska, 2010);

    b) pathological changes of a professional nature relating primarily to the straining and non-ergonomic use of nerves, tendons and the spine (Janiszewski, 1992; Kenny & Ackermann, 2009);

    c) difficulties to remember theoretical structures as well as melodic and rhythmic structures (Kępińska-Welbel, 1985; Gluska 2010);

    d) stage fright and social anxiety associated with public performances and the evaluation by listeners (see Chwedorowicz, 1991; Wilson & Roland, 2002; Lehmann, Sloboda, & Woody, 2007; Kępińska-Welbel, 2010);

2) personal problems:

    a) resulting from failed interpersonal relationships, among which an important role play:

- family conflicts and above all the lack of understanding on the part of the family;
- conflicts with teachers and most of all difficulties in relations with the teacher of the instrument;
- conflicts in the peer group and most of all a sense of the lack of acceptance among peers (Manturzewska, 1977);
- disorders in the family structure caused by divorces, single parenting or Euro-orphanhood (Plopa, 2008; Gluska, 2010);

    b) resulting from an unfavorable structure of individual characteristics:

- an unfavorable structure of personality traits;
- too low or too high level of intelligence (Statkiewicz, 1985; Kępińska-Welbel, 1985);
- an inharmonious structure of musical and cognitive abilities (Stachowicz, 1975);
- a low mental resistance to stressful situations;
- fluctuations in motivation;
- difficulties in attention span, fatigue and intense work overload;
- psychotic disorders (Manturzewska, 1977; Kępińska-Welbel, 1985; 1999; North & Hargreaves, 2008);

3) difficulties arising from developmental abnormalities, which include students manifesting dyslexia (see Sierszeńska-Leraczyk, 1999; Lipińska, 2008; Matusiak, 2010), motor hyperactivity and disorders with the symptoms of autism (Gluska, 2010).

    The above attempt to systematize the problems experienced by music school students was aimed not only at preparing an original (the present authors')

categorization, but also to highlight the complexity and diversity of experiences that may be shared by musically talented children and youth. Each student of a music school can experience these difficulties to a greater or a lesser extent, once or periodically, either singly or in the constellation of selected difficulties.

Each situation of experiencing specific difficulties has its influence on musical achievements. Negative impacts of the environment or an adverse structure of individual properties influence the reduction of musical achievements' level and failures in the process of musical education (Kotarska, 1990). The most important reasons for difficulties and failures in the learning of music include too high level of activities in the non-musical areas of functioning (an excess of school duties and numerous other interests), aversion to making an effort and fluctuations in motivation (Lewandowska, 2010). The low level of school achievements and the lack of success in music education is also affected by socio-economic factors such as: a distant place of home residence, economic problems of the family and a large number of children in the family, the lack of music stimulation in the pre-school period and a low music culture of the environment (Janczewski, 1977). In addition, students who have a lower level of social maturity and lower competences in emotional balance manifest a low level of musical achievements. Moreover, they are characterized by a lower self-control, lower sense of responsibility and a lower need for achievements. They have a higher need for sociability, which is probably a distractor for conscientious and individual practicing on the instrument (Kotarska, 1990).

The awareness of specific difficulties experienced by the students of music schools and consequent educational threats constitute the basis to form optimal conditions for teaching, didactics and psycho-pedagogical care in artistic education. In addition, the dissemination of this knowledge among the members of the music community has a didactic and preventative value. At the same time, the knowledge indicates the important role of the relevant environmental impacts, for which parents, teachers, as well as students in relation to each other can be responsible.

The Master-Disciple Relationship

Musical education is in many ways unique in its nature and its methodical and didactic structure. One of the factors distinguishing it among the other forms and methods of teaching is the frequent and regular individual contact of the student with the main instrument teacher.

The literature of music psychology and pedagogy provides numerous studies indicating the vital role of the *master-disciple* relationship, which is based on mutual understanding, respect, and trust. Such a healthy relationship depends upon the psychological competences of teachers who demonstrate diversified

personality traits and different levels of musical ability as well as commitment or motivation, are especially important (see Manturzewska, 1990; Jaślar-Walicka, 1999; Mierzejewska-Orzechowska, 1999; Gliniecka-Rękawik, 2007; 2009; Lehmann, Sloboda, & Woody, 2007).

A key role in the individual *master-disciple* relationship involves the teacher's personality. An effective and successful education at a music school will be provided by a teacher characterized by, among other traits, emotional maturity, balance, commitment, resistance to the hardships of daily work, focus on the student (and not on himself or herself), responsibility for the teaching process and for the student as well as the ability to make the student independent (Olbrycht, 1998; Hewitt, 2006; Konaszkiewicz, 2009). A special teacher's competence is the ability to show empathy and the provision of support to the student in emotionally difficult situations (Markiewicz, 2008; Welch & Ockelford, 2009).

In the process of musical education, the teacher-student relationship undergoes a variety of changes, arising primarily from the student's increasing psychophysical as well as emotional and social maturity. The model of particular musicians' life trajectory based on biographical research by Maria Manturzewska (1990) and the three-stage model of music education, created on the basis of research by Lauren Sosniak (1997), indicate the specificity of changes in the student-teacher relationship at various stages of development within the context of music education.

In the early years of music education, the first teacher of the instrument should have a friendly attitude to the child, a cheerful mood, the ability to derive joy and satisfaction from working with young children and a creative inventiveness in terms of methods and strategies of pedagogical impact on the child (Manturzewska, 1990; Jaślar-Walicka, 1999). He or she should have a so-called personality that "lifts" rather than puts down the student. The "lifting" personality is characterized by noticing the student's progress, while also paying attention to what can still be improved. A teacher with a put-down personality is focused on the deficiencies and he or she treats positive achievements as something natural. Unfortunately, studies by Magdalena Gliniecka-Rękawik (2007) conducted among students of several Polish music schools indicated that the students who did not continue their musical education at a higher level remembered their first teachers as people who were not characterized by positive personality qualities. It can be assumed that the lack of support, understanding and kindness on the part of the main subject teacher was one of the reasons for their low musical achievements, which in turn led to their resignation from the school of music.

At the second stage of musical education, characterized by an increasing precision in the technique of performance and the student's motivation, the teacher assumes the role of a more demanding and directive person (Jaślar-Walicka,

1999). In addition, teaching a musically gifted young person involves getting the student into individual/independent work, building the student's self-esteem, as well as focusing on precise identification of realistic objectives (Mierzejewska-Orzechowska, 1999).

It is not until the third stage of musical education that the student's contact with the teacher can be changed into an authentic *master-disciple* relationship. This is mainly due to the emotional and musical maturity of the student and his or her readiness to acquire a comprehensive musical knowledge base (Manturzewska, 1990). Musically talented young people look for their masters very often outside their own school or decide to change their teacher for one who in their eyes is characterized by a higher prestige and holds promise for a better working relationship. The musical personality development of a young prospective artist can be very closely linked to the personality type and the level of competence of their teacher, and in particular with the values professed by the mentor (Konaszkiewicz, 2001). Personal student contact with his or her master-teacher promotes comprehensive changes that may go beyond issues related *strictly* to musical performances. The master-teacher becomes then a guide not only within the secrets of the art of music, but also within the art of living (Smendzianka, 2004). In addition, educator Aleksander Nalaskowski reminds us that "the teacher does not have to be a master, but must be able to lead to mastery" (Konaszkiewicz, 2004, p. 54).

The personal student-teacher relationship is one of the key elements indicating the specificity of functioning of the students pursuing education in a music school. The nature and quality of mentoring often creates a decisive influence on the attitude and commitment of the student to learn music and this translates into life achievements. The advantages of conducting music lessons individually, which simultaneously mobilize the student to intensive intellectual as well as technical and performing work are (Sosnowska, 1973):

–   a frequent verification of the results of the student's independent work and a quick elimination of erroneous habits,
–   an increase in stage responsibility resulting from having to play in front of the teacher,
–   the possibility of solving the student's theoretical and individual dilemmas, in both the sphere of musical performance and interpretation and in the personal sphere.

Therefore, learning to play an instrument can be considered comprehensive when the development of technical skills will continue in parallel with the training of the auditory sensitivity and the development of the intellectual sphere (Markiewicz, 2008).

The student's cooperation with his or her master-teacher is more effective if it is preceded by the student's reliable work on his or her own. Practicing on the instrument is therefore another important process, without which a successful musical education is impossible.

Instrumental Practice and Musical Achievement

Practicing on an instrument is the primary and most important duty carried out by students of music schools at every stage of their education. It is impossible to acquire musical competence, particularly the technical competences of musical performance, without the student's independent work and without the implementation of these skills during practicing.

Dedicated practice is an essential habit for musicians not only in in the process of their education but also at every stage of their professional careers. Preparation of a new repertoire and its presentation to an audience must be preceded by several hours or even several weeks of practicing, within which a number of processes responsible for the technical, musical, memory-related and interpretation-related preparation of the piece of music take place (Jørgensen & Hallam, 2009).

> *If I don't practice for one day, I know it;*
> *If I don't practice for two days, the critics know it;*
> *If I don't practice for three days, the audience knows it.*

Ignacy Jan Paderewski (1986)

Numerous studies have shown that the amount of practicing increases the probability of success and the level of musical achievement (Jørgensen, 2009). Professionals who achieve significant professional success, at the age of twenty have had over 10000 hours of practicing (Ericsson et al., after: Lehmann, Sloboda, & Woody, 2007). Achieving the level of performance that allows one to hold an international position requires approximately 16 years of practicing on an instrument (Sosniak, 1997; Hallam, 2009).

However, the amount of time spent practicing is not the only important factor leading to high musical achievement: the quality of practice is also crucial. The best students, or the students who obtain high ratings during semester exams and who participate in prestigious music competitions and courses, have a greater range of effective and efficient strategies for practicing than average or weak students (Kaczmarek, 2010). The model of effective practicing includes first of all such strategies as: goal-setting, a conscious management of time, choice of activities to prepare for practicing, focus on individual elements of the musical work (tempo,

intonation, technique), and a mental and psychological support system for public performances (Jørgensen, 2004). Musical excellence depends on being able to effectively plan the time devoted to practicing (Davidson, Howe, & Sloboda, 2009). Research carried out by Manturzewska (1969) in the 1960s among the participants of the 6th International Chopin Piano Competition confirmed that regularity of practicing, the amount of time spent on practicing and perseverance and precision in the improvement of their performance technique explained the high level of performance in participants from musical academies.

Publications in the field propose that practicing is understood in two ways. On the one hand, practice aims to increase and consolidate the technical competence in performing the repertoire being prepared. On the other hand, the mental strategies used during practicing are aimed at a psychological preparation of the musician as a public performer. The psychological mindset of the musician during practicing and during a public performance differs dramatically. During a public performance the musician is burdened with additional strong emotions and pressure resulting from being judged. Stage fright manifests itself in feelings of embarrassment, discomfort or danger caused by switching on, in the course of performance, factors that were not present during practicing (Wroński, 1996). Mental strategies can be employed to control these emotions.

However, stage fright experienced by musicians during public appearances also involves socio-emotional factors that characterize people engaged in the art of music.

Stage Fright and Public Performances

> *Stage fright is the price that we artists pay for the wonderful experiences related to the performance of music.*
>
> Arthur Rubinstein (1976)

The difficulties arising from the presence of excessive stage fright during public appearances are widely recognized as one of the reasons for the lack of achievements in music schools and for the interruption or discontinuation of many wonderfully promising musical careers (Kępińska-Welbel, 1999). Although the ability to cope with stage fright is not strictly part of the range of musical competence, the performer's emotional ability to cope with the situation of public exposure is very often considered in the assessment during exams in music schools or during preliminary competitions (cf. Miklaszewski, 2006).

Arthur Rubinstein's words above can serve as a translation of Hans Selye's stress theory into the world of music, sounds, and public performances. This

theory presupposes the existence of two criteria of stress, i.e. *eustress/a good stress* – that motivates a person to effort and life achievements and *distress/a bad stress* – that brings anxiety and mental disintegration (Terelak, 2008). In music environment, *the good stress* characterizes a mobilizing stage fright and *the bad stress* manifests itself as paralyzing stage fright. A mobilizing stage fright increases success during public appearances and characterizes people with a higher level of musical achievement while the paralyzing stage fright reduces the performance level of a prepared repertoire and characterizes people with a lower level of musical achievement (see Chwedorowicz, 1991; Lehmann, Sloboda, & Woody, 2007).

Stage fright is a type of social anxiety that manifests itself at the time of assessment carried out by others, in a real or imagined social situation (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). In music performance stage fright appears when, apart from the assessment resulting from exposure to the public, there is also an element of time pressure, and thus an inability to correct a committed error (Kępińska-Welbel, 2000; 1999; 2010).

Although the cause of stage fright emergence is associated primarily with public exposure, artists often differ in their attitude to public performances and their perception of the social context (the latter increases the occurrence of stage fright). A novice musician might fear that he or she will not meet the expectations of educators, or whether the level of his or her musical abilities is sufficient to succeed in the field of musical performance. In turn, an experienced artist can feel a fear of meeting the expectations of listeners or may feel anxiety resulting from burnout or a sense of routine or rivalry with his or her rivals (cf. Wilson, 2009).

Doubts, fears, and anxieties produce a diverse range of signs of stage fright which lowers the performance level of a prepared repertoire. Symptoms experienced by musicians during public appearances are divided into four categories (after: Wroński, 1996; Kępińska-Welbel, 1999; Leary & Kowalski, 2002; Lehmann, Sloboda, & Woody, 2007; Wilson, 2009):

1) **cognitive symptoms** – negative thoughts and insights about themselves and their preparation, worrying about a possible unfavorable opinion of the audience, belittling their value, focusing on the shortcomings of their playing; catastrophic thinking, fear of failure;

2) **somatic symptoms** – all the reactions of the cardiovascular system (increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, increased pulse rate, blushing), reactions of the respiratory system (rapid breathing, shortness of breath), increased muscle tone (limb tremors, a feeling of the body trembling, a sense of the body gravity), increased sweating;

3) **behavioral symptoms** – behaviors indicating nervousness and desire to escape from stressful circumstances; uncontrolled gestures and facial expressions, motor hyperactivity, uncontrollable reflexes (e.g. nail biting);

4) **emotional symptoms** – anger, depressed mood, depression, nervousness, hopelessness.

The literature of music psychology provides numerous tips on techniques to effectively reduce the negative symptoms of stage fright and to improve effectiveness and success during public appearances (Wilson & Roland, 2002; Ryan, Wapnick, Lacaille, & Darrow, 2006; Windsor, 2009). Effective ways of coping with stage fright at the same time demand a greater intellectual effort as one prepares for public appearances. Unfortunately, there are musicians who use "shortcuts," i.e. pharmacological agents that soothe and reduce the adverse reactions of the autonomous nervous system. Such interventions may adversely affect the quality of playing, musical interpretation and emotional expression (Kępińska-Welbel, 1999). In addition, their use can lead to addiction and weaken the body's own ways of resistance to difficult situations (Zagrodzki, 2009).

Therefore, a responsible musician, wishing properly and consciously to pursue his or her professional goals, will increase their effectiveness during public appearances with the use of mental, psychological strategies to deal with stage fright. The most popular ways to reduce the negative symptoms of stage fright include (inter alia):

1) conscious practicing, focused on the particular elements of the repertoire being prepared combined with the motivation of achievement (Wroński, 1996; McCormick & McPherson, 2003);

2) relaxation and breathing exercises; e.g. Schulz's autogenic training or Alexander's technique (Kępińska-Welbel, 1999; Wilson & Roland, 2002);

3) desensitization techniques, the so-called "stress inoculation" involving a gradual exposure to stressors (Kępińska-Welbel, 1999; Kenny & Osborne, 2006);

4) visualizations of public appearances, presenting the expected artistic success and focusing on a high efficiency of the performative apparatus (Wroński, 1996; Gawain, 2001; Lehmann, Sloboda, & Woody, 2007).

In fact, the diversity of individual strategies to cope with stage fright by musicians and music school students is limitless, since each performer can independently interpret and modify selected suggestions and techniques. The types of strategies are also dependent on other individual characteristics, such as the level of musical ability or the musician's personality. People with a high level of musical ability focus on the artistic side of their performance, but they also have more self-confidence arising from a sense of their self-efficacy. In contrast, people with a low level of musical ability experience stage fright associated with a fear of managing to fulfill the technical demands of the repertoire. They also exhibit a low level of self-acceptance, lack of self-confidence and low levels of consistency

associated with their own playing on the instrument (North & Hargreaves, 2008, Wilson, 2009).

High-level musical achievement results from the performer's psychological ability to consciously control the negative symptoms of stage fright and to focus on the musical piece rather than on the circumstances or outcomes of the performance (Lehmann, Sloboda, & Woody, 2007). In addition, people with high musical achievement are characterized by emotional balance, emotional mastery in difficult situations, positive thinking, and a realistic assessment of the situation of public performance (Nogaj, 2008).

Experiencing stage fright is an integral part of music education and career. Therefore, analyzing the music achievement and success of music school students, one cannot underestimate the strategies of coping with public performance. However, another important element associated with music education and in part also connected with experiencing stage fright stemming from social comparison, is peer rivalry.

Peer Rivalry and Competition in Music Schools

Peers are an extremely important, if not the most important reference group at school age (Stefańska-Klar, 2000, Obuchowska, 2000). The peer group is primarily associated with the school environment in which each student has a specific position and status. This situation is also inextricably linked with a sense of prestige and acceptance among peers or with the lack of such a sense (Janowski & Stachyra, 1985). A phenomenon that particularly binds peer groups is a community of action and time spent together, both due to school education as well as while having fun together (Appelt, 2005).

The process of peer socialization is important for music school students who, on the one hand, experience close and strong friendships (e.g. due to the amount of time spent together and similarity of interests) and serve as a reference group for each other in terms of behavior, attire, attitudes and values in the field of music. On the other hand, their common interest in music, learning to play an instrument and frequent individual exams, concerts and performances means that they are subject to an unwritten process of rivalry and competition in musical performance.

The school peers of musically gifted individuals are at the same time one of the groups that stimulate musical interests (Gembris & Davidson, 2002). An increase of motivation to play an instrument is noted among students for whom music, practicing, and making music together represent positive values. This gives them mutual benefits and is a source of personal satisfaction and pleasure. An individual decline in motivation for learning and practicing on a musical instrument was noticeable among students whose peers do not demonstrate a genuine interest

in music or do not plan their professional future in the musical milieu (O'Neill & McPherson, 2002).

The belief that competition and examination rivalry are the most important sources of motivation for music students learning to play musical instruments is a modern myth. Jane R. Austin (1991) has shown that creating a situation for secure learning and musical cooperation is just as effective for musical achievement as an environment in which musical competition among peers takes place.

In addition, lack of regular contacts with peers in conjunction with a competitive attitude to practicing and someone's own performances can soon result in a sense of burnout, fatigue and in low achievement in music performance (Moore, Burland, & Davidson, 2003).

There are also noticeable differences in the frequency of contacts with peers among music school students, depending on their instrumental specialty. String instruments, particularly the violin, and among keyboard instruments, the piano, require more time spent on practicing than other instruments, therefore, students playing these instruments have a lower level of sociability than their peers who play other instruments such as, for example, wind instruments (Guettler & Hallam, 2002).

Also significant is the student's well-being resulting from their musical identity and belonging to a specific group of instrumentalists (Davidson, Howe, & Sloboda, 2009). The choice of instrument and its perceived status by peers can be important for the mental welfare and musical identity of the music school student. Research has shown that students playing instruments socially assigned to a particular sex may experience negative reactions from peers if they are representatives of the opposite sex; e.g. boys playing the flute or girls playing the trombone (O'Neill & Boulton, 1996).

A study on the social position in the peer group was carried out among the very talented and the mediocre students of general education schools (Tyszkowa, 1990). The results of this study demonstrate that talented students exhibiting high levels of educational attainment have a higher social position among their peers. This is particularly true when they are assessed by their class as being important for the class and group life, and if they exhibit personality traits that facilitate their social adaptation, with a tendency to liken themselves to an average member of the group. At the same time talented students, characterized by a high degree of unconventionality, expansiveness, and independence, are isolated from the class group. Students' school performance and achievements are not judged by their peers in isolation from their other important social skills, competence and behaviors.

Peers play an important role in the overall individual developmental process, but also in the development of artistic and musical career paths of their classmates. Their impact on the quality of school career depends on other individual

and social determinants characterizing the music school student (Lehmann, Sloboda, & Woody, 2002; Gembris & Davidson, 2002). Therefore, one can point to a constellation of factors, and not only to a single factor. Thus it is important to create a favorable learning environment for the musically gifted student.

Summarising the above considerations it must be emphasised that musical education has a series of positive practical implications (Nogaj & Bogunović, 2015). Although music school students experience diverse difficulties and challenges, musical education contributes to the development of many areas of psychophysical functioning (Hallam, 2008). Through musical activity students develop not only their knowledge about music but they also widen their performing abilities. Undertaking musical tasks stimulates the development of cognitive structures, contributes to an increase in psychological resistance and effectively forms styles of stress coping strategies (see Gaunt & Hallam, 2009; Kemp, 2009; Nogaj, 2013). Moreover, high levels of achievement in the field of music are possible through connecting the students' musical abilities with certain personality traits in effect under favorable environmental conditions.

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