

TEACHER'S ROLE IN MANAGING STUDENT PERFORMANCE ANXIETY IN PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS

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ABSTRACT

One of the paradoxical situations encountered among musicians highlights the well-being/poor health binomial state, in which the same individual can feel, for example, a well-being sensation when listening to a musical work, while the same individual may experience anxiety, palpitations and depression, or rather poor mental health, when it comes to performing the work in front of an audience. Mental health appears to be directly proportional to the quality of the performance. The more harmonised and balanced the mind-energy-body aggregate is, the more enjoyable the experience of playing a musical instrument can become. Most primary school pupils (ages 7-11) are unaware of the physical, psychological and emotional complexities and implications of instrumental performance; as a consequence, the role of harmonising them lies with the instrument teacher that, in the early years of violin study, has a significant impact on the further development of the child as a performer and on the attitude the pupil develops towards music.

KEYWORDS

teacher, violin, anxiety, oxytocin, emotions

INTRODUCTION

Studies have shown that listening to music can stimulate the release of neurotransmitters such as dopamine, which is associated with feelings of pleasure and reward, and oxytocin (Links Between the Neurobiology of Oxytocin and Human Musicality, 2020). The latter is a hormone synthesized in the hypothalamus (Harvey, 2020, 2) and released into the circulatory system by the pituitary gland. It also "decreases anxious feelings in humans and therefore may have therapeutic value for anxiety disorders" (Missig, Ayers, Schulkin, & Rosen 2010). Its beneficial effects on the individual are also observable in increased levels of self-confidence, generosity and empathy.

The release of neurotransmitters thus creates chemical reactions in the brain, which can result in the listener feeling opposite emotions, from happiness and joy to sadness and nostalgia.

The emotional response to listening to music is also influenced by factors such as personal experiences, cultural background and individual preferences. For example, the same work may evoke positive emotions for one person, while another person may experience negative emotions depending on the perception and personal experiences they identify with.

Musicians often use music as a means of expressing their own emotions, and listeners may perceive it as a way of balancing their own emotional states. For example, a person who feels sad or anxious may listen to soothing music to relax, while a person who feels energised or excited may listen to more rhythmic music to improve their mood.

It can be seen that the link between music and emotions is a complex and subjective one, that, depending on the chemical reactions in the brain, varies from person to person, depending on their perception.

BENEFITS OF CHILD EXPOSURE TO MUSIC EDUCATION

One of the most important benefits of early exposure to music is its impact on brain development. Studies have shown that listening to and performing music can strengthen the neural connections in the brain which are responsible for language processing (Dittinger, Abolfazl, Jäncke, Besson, Elmer, 2017, 722). At the same time, early exposure of children to music can have a positive impact on several areas of development, including cultural, creative and emotional development. For example, "learning to play a musical instrument as a child may even predict academic performance and IQ in young adulthood" (Miendlarzewska and Trost, 2014, 1). Thus, the benefits resulting from approaching music can be found in various areas necessary in a child's harmonious development, as follows:

- Brain development – in this sense, music can help strengthen brain connections and potentially improve cognitive abilities.
- Language development – learning music involves a continuous process of listening and repetition, that can help to improve language development. Exposure to music can also help children develop the ability to recognise speech sounds.
- Cultural exposure – music is a universal language, present in every culture. Early exposure to music can help children discover different cultures and traditions and appreciate the diversity of the world around them.
- Creative expression – music offers a unique form of creative expression that can help pupils develop their own identity.
- Emotional development – music can elicit strong emotional responses and early exposure to music can help pupils develop an ability to manage them. They can also learn to recognise and express different emotions through music, that can help develop their emotional intelligence and empathy.

GENERAL ASPECTS OF VIOLIN EDUCATION

Violin education is a complex process that requires a lot of dedication, individual study and attention to detail. The complexity lies in a level of concentration on several planes simultaneously, bringing together the physical, mental and emotional planes. Thus, for the primary school pupil, the violin can be a difficult instrument to learn, however, with perseverance and a skilful teacher they can improve their technical skills and enjoy the results of their efforts. The elements that need to be considered in this regard should follow aspects such as:

- Physical requirements – playing the violin requires a high level of dexterity and coordination. The pupil must place the violin on their left shoulder and support it with their chin, articulate with their left hand fingers on the strings in order to play different sounds and control the bow strokes that produce the sound with their right hand.
- Intonation – the violin is a non-tempered instrument that requires precise intonation, which means the student must play each sound at an extremely precise pitch. Unlike keyboard instruments, intonation on the violin must be constantly adjusted and the student must rely on muscle memory and musical hearing to produce accurate intonation. This can be a challenge, especially for beginners, and it takes a lot of practice to develop the ability to correct the sound even during performance, as necessary.
- Notation – learning to read and interpret musical symbols is an essential part of playing the violin. The student should be able to read musical scores, understand rhythm and interpret the various indications in the score.
- Expressive playing – the violin is an instrument capable of producing a wide range of sounds and dynamics. To play expressively, the student must be able to control their bowing and fingering technique and understand how to give the music meaning through phrasing and dynamics.

A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

Since the synchronisation of all the aforementioned elements requires a particular level of coherence in synchronicity among various cortical areas, the study of violin subjects the student to a complex set of psychological, cognitive and brain morphological structure modification processes from the very first lessons, resulting in the development of a wide range of abilities and skills that include much-increased attention span, self-discipline and problem-solving.

From the teacher's perspective, violin lessons can be both a rewarding and challenging process. As a teacher, it is important to have a well-structured approach and effective methods to help the student overcome the technical and emotional issues that arise within the first few lessons as knowing, understanding and controlling these two aspects helps to create a performing experience that the student will want to have again and again.

Emotional development is an ongoing process and can vary greatly from child to child. For example, some 9-year olds may be more advanced in their emotional development, while others may still have difficulty managing stressful situations. In this respect, as violin lessons are conducted on an individual basis, the teacher needs to take into account the developmental level of each child and adapt and personalise the teaching method to the individual characteristics of each child. Thus, the teacher has a particularly important role to play in supporting and guiding the pupil both in the development of the necessary technical instrumental skills and in the ability to manage performing emotions during both, practice sessions and while performing in front of an audience.

The whole process of learning a musical instrument revolves around the achievement of a qualitative sound. With this goal in mind, the teacher guides the student in achieving a well-balanced and rich tone with well-crafted attack and release as well as seamless string crossings. This, in turn, helps students feel that they can use such instrumental tone in order to express themselves, thus creating the intrinsic motivation to continue studying despite technical difficulties.

Terms such as bright, pure, clear, dark, full, sweet or harsh associated with sound are linguistic associations meant to highlight auditory impressions. In his book, *Problems of Tone Production in Violin Playing*, the Hungarian-born violinist and teacher, Carl Flesch, states that "in the case of differentiating views of sound, we are forced, so to speak, to transpose our acoustic impressions into terminology used for other organs of perception, in order to make ourselves understood. . . . Thus, sight, taste, smell, the sense of touch, and the emotions of life in general, must serve as a guide in listening to and interpreting music, which in reality is perceived only by the ear" (Flesch, 1934, 7).

METHODOLOGY

The following is a step by step presentation of a methodology applied during violin lessons for primary school children with the aim being to solve technical issues while also creating the context in which they can become familiarized with feelings of anxiety caused by performing a musical fragment in front of an audience.

To begin with, a positive learning environment is provided, in which students feel more comfortable and confident in their abilities. Encouragement, constructive feedback and a non-judgmental attitude can go a long way to building students' confidence.

Next, we use coping strategies, such as deep breathing and visualisation techniques that have the aim of helping the students to manage their anxiety and feel more in control of their performance. It is important that students are aware of these techniques from the very first classes, so by the time they appear on stage, they are already familiar with the sensations that may occur, while also having the mechanisms to manage them. Generally, we suggest that students apply these strategies both during individual study and before and during performances.

We then proceed to set realistic, achievable goals in the short, medium and long term so that they feel more in control and more motivated to improve the necessary details. By breaking down larger goals into smaller steps with immediate results, students can develop their skills and confidence in their own abilities.

Next, we create a low-stress environment for each student to become familiar with the emotions they are experiencing. Class recitals are organized, where they have to perform in front of their peers and also later perform in front of a small group of friends or family.

Finally, ensuring that students are well prepared for their performances through diligent practice and attention to technique, a number of anxiety-reducing strategies are explored on a case by case basis. In doing so, a gradual path through which students can work out their technical issues is ensured for each individual. This approach includes assessment, demonstration, breakdown, rehearsal, integration and monitoring of technical problems as follows:

- Technical issue assessment – the first step in solving any technical problem is to identify and assess it. Teachers observe how students interpret and listen actively, carefully, in order to identify any problems that may be hindering their progress. This can be anything from poor posture and poor bow technique to incorrect finger placement on the string.
- Demonstrate correct technique – once a technical issue is identified, the correct technique is demonstrated to the student, using a different instrument. This helps to model posture, bow hold and finger placement. Thus, the student can visualize the correct techniques and gives them a clear example to follow.
- Breaking down the technical steps – after demonstrating the correct technique, it is further broken down into smaller, more manageable steps. This helps the student focus on one aspect of the technique at a time and prevents them from feeling overwhelmed. For example, if the student is having difficulty grasping the bow correctly, we might break the process down into smaller segments, explaining the position of each finger in turn, and the placement of the bow on the string.
- Practicing the technique – once the technique has been broken down into smaller steps, the students are encouraged to practice slowly, each step at a time. This allows them to focus on a specific detail they need to improve and helps them to build muscle memory. At the same time, we give constructive feedback to make sure they are studying the techniques correctly.
- Integrating the passage – after the student has practised the technique individually, they are given instructions on how to integrate the whole passage into a larger musical context, connecting it with previous and subsequent measures. This gives the student a sense of accomplishment as they are able to

understand the role of fragment study in the general flow of playing the whole musical piece.

- Progress monitoring - ultimately, this means tracking the student's progress over a longer period of time. If the student still encounters difficulties with a particular passage, we may go back and repeat the steps described above until the student becomes confident and demonstrates control of the technique required.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, exposure to music at an early age can have a wide range of benefits for children. From improving cognitive function to stimulating social and physical development, there are many reasons why parents and teachers should consider incorporating music into a child's early years.

The teacher's input in the early years of violin study is crucial in creating the skills necessary for the student to perform complex musical works later on. At the same time, the teacher is perhaps the primary school child's most reliable support in managing performance anxiety. In this respect, a structured approach to the musical repertoire together with effective methods of solving technical problems and the creation of a conducive learning environment in which the pupil is exposed to various stressful situations, are attributes of an effective teacher.

Last but not least, regardless of each child's talent level or career path later in life, providing hands-on music instruction can help them develop skills, self-confidence and enjoyment, attributes that can benefit them throughout their lives.

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