

MOTIVATION AND LEARNING STYLE-TOWARDS A SCIENTIFIC APPROACH TO MUSIC LEARNING

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Während die meisten Erwachsenen regelmäßig Musik hören, ist die Zahl aktiv Musizierender sehr niedrig. In westeuropäischen Ländern kommen fast alle Kinder während ihrer Schulzeit mit Musik in Berührung, wobei aber die Mehrheit bis zum Erwachsenenalter eigene Musizerversuche abbricht. Eine verbreitete Erklärung hierfür ist, dass Menschen richtigerweise einsehen, dass ihnen die notwendige Begabung um befriedigend Musik zu machen fehle und daher aufhören Instrumente zu spielen oder zu singen. Dieser Artikel vertritt eine radikal andere Herangehensweise und argumentiert – ausgehend von den Arbeiten des Schweizer Musikpädagogen Heinrich Jacoby, dass Scheitern in der Musik besser durch externe und motivationale Faktoren als durch Begabung erklärt werden kann. Ein Überblick über relevante Forschung sowie Ergebnisse einer in Deutschland 2006 durchgeführten Studie werden vorgestellt.

“The majority of the population assumes that talents are in-born. Or one is “musical” or one is not; habitually say especially those individuals, who think of themselves as less “musical”. And those, who receive the quality certificate of being “musical”, take joyously notice of that.” Helmut Rösing, professor of Systematic Musicology at Hamburg University (1992)

Introduction

Music is a constant companion in our daily life – whether we welcome it while going to concerts or switching on our preferred music or whether we endure its more disliked manifestations in public spaces like restaurant or shopping malls.

Nonetheless, most of us would certainly affirm the question whether they like music in general, spending often hours consuming it in its various available forms. If we, however, compare passive reception and active music making, we see a deep contrast in disfavor of the latter. This phenomenon in the relation between production and consumption – talking in economic terms – appears more or less pronounced in other art forms, too. However, there are other areas where this ratio is exactly the opposite: people engage more in things they like than they observe others doing them (e.g., sex and eating). One could argue now that the ratio depends on the availability to perform and – most important – on the inherent difficulty of an activity (e.g. tightrope acrobatics may be nice to watch but in terms of balance we prefer to stick to our bike, at the most). Thus, in our culture making music would be considered more difficult than eating or having sex (individuals with sexual function disorders would protest). To be successful in the more “difficult” areas like music, mathematics or foreign languages either exceptional effort or inborn talent would be needed.

This article offers a different perspective on the problem, presenting the views of Swiss music pedagogue Heinrich Jacoby, who was one of the most fundamental critics of the talent hypothesis. Later on we discuss the question in light of empirical psychological research.

Our argument will concentrate on music education only, its implications being however transferable to other areas of human creativity, too.

Heinrich Jacoby's pedagogy of music

"If a child has difficulties learning to walk or to speak, it appears to everyone as the nearest thing, to ask about the causes of the disorder. That we have to deal with disturbances of elementary functions is for us in the same way evident, as it is evident that every human being walks and speaks. In exactly the same way it is evident, that we undertake everything to remedy these disorders. But, if an individual cannot draw, sing, dance, model, if he cannot "learn" "foreign" languages or mathematics, we declare shortly, that he is "not talented" for it. We satisfy ourselves with the remark that he "cannot" do these things." (Jacoby, 1995, p. 88)

Heinrich Jacoby (1889-1964) claimed that there is nothing like talent or giftedness, remark that led to a dissent with his former teacher and renowned German composer Hans Pfitzner. All that we commonly understand by "genial" would be according to Jacoby only the normal level of human functioning, in an education system which does not systematically destroy the inborn capacities in every human being. Thus, the question is: why do not all individuals reach this "normal" level?

His point is that children's inherent capacity to express themselves through music is spoiled in Western music education, system which focuses right from the beginning on imitation and on the differentiation between "right" and "wrong" sounds (Jacoby, 1995; 2003). Jacoby, in turn, claims that music should be learned like one learns one's mother tongue; passing through different phases of explorative improvisation (cooing, babbling) until one discovers step by step the language's inherent grammatical laws. This way, a child would discover the piano playfully and attentively, exploring all the possibilities of producing sounds and their combinations, developing a feeling for tension and resolution.

One problem is that music is most often considered an "art" form, rather than one channel of human expression. Especially in the so called "classical" music the focus is on an accurate reproduction of already written works; the ideal representing to be as soon as possible able to reproduce the works of the "great masters". Thus, less necessity is seen in wasting time in the beginning just learning to "talk" music freely. This may explain the fact that while children are accustomed to draw their own paintings from kindergarten onwards, few pose themselves the question why they learn singing others' songs only.

What is actually wrong with music education?

Heinrich Jacoby would state that most of our educational systems in music – however different their label and how "modern" their approach – have the following laws in common:

- Early focus on visual orientation (reading notes) before the child has developed an accuracy in hearing; he or she will later on just mechanically "finger" or

tap the music following the written notes without hearing any clear representation of how it will sound BEFORE playing.

- Imitation of others' music and thus, the differentiation between "right" and "wrong" sounds, leading to an increased tension while playing, especially when "wrong" sounds are punished.

The whole process being an unnatural one, learning difficulties should come as no surprise. As there are no radical alternatives visible in ways of learning music, people start attributing their failure to lack of effort or – often – lack of talent, a view which is reinforced by the general view of music being a reserved realm for gifted people and by feedback from music teachers, who comment on their pupils' lack of giftedness (e.g., "You have no voice!" in the school-choir). The latter remarks can act as traumatic events leading people to avoid situations where they have already been shamed.

A study on lay musicians from three different cultures – African, South American and European – shows evidence for the blocking effects of such events throughout later life (*Ohrband, 2005*). Examples of such situations are:

- Being asked to sing before the whole class, failing and being laughed at.
- Derogative remarks by peers, parents and music teacher, especially comparison to more successful siblings or pupils ("Your younger sister is just more gifted than you").

Heinrich Jacoby makes a comparison to language learning. Imagine a world in which all babies would be shown textbooks on phonetics with pictures how to produce different sounds and would be dressed to recite sonnets by William Shakespeare by means of imitation. If we then came across a person who could freely talk and express his thoughts through words we would possibly state that he is especially "gifted".

However, Jacoby views these flaws not only in the realm of music but in the entire educational system.

"We meet here with the negative consequences of a general position of a society, who in its "educational ideal" almost breeds the inhibited man as a type: What do we call "well educated?" Smooth, calm "manners", conversation without passion, "measured" movements, the hiding of all spontaneous feeling, in short: repression or at least as much as possible complete hiding or blurring of all signs of free, personal expression" (Jacoby, 1995, p. 96)

These words were originally uttered in the 1950s; how much has changed?

Psychological research on the heredity of talent

The nature / nurture discussion which a long time had been fought very fundamentally has apparently turned into a more or less generally accepted compromise: genetic/biological and environmental/social factors interact in the manifestation of certain behavior. However, speaking of inborn talent in the arts endures in the scientific discourse.

Taking the question whether extraordinary manifest capacities in music stem from inborn talent or a favorable environment; how could we decide that problem empirically?

A traditional approach in the domain of heredity research has been to focus on twins who were separated after birth. High correlations between their subsequent levels of musicality would thus be taken as an indicator for a greater influence of heredity; arguing that since their environments differed completely, observed similarities could only be explained by genetic factors. Beside the problems that such studies have been conducted mostly on personality and intelligence and not on music performance and that nonetheless the separated twins' environments seems to be more similar than different, such conclusion rest on an apparent flaw: both twins have already shared the very same (prenatal) environment for nine months! Are we to assume that it has absolutely no impact whether the mother sings or listens to music regularly or not? To really decide the question we would need an indicator in the embryo to assess whether it has high inborn talent or not for music; which even today seems very far-fetched. Another fundamental problem in studying musical talent is that the population of stellar performers is comparatively small. To conduct longitudinal studies and to apply correlation and regression techniques with such a small sample size makes it extremely difficult to get statistically significant results. Just imagine: If one in ten thousand (I do not know the actual statistics) babies becomes a really exceptional musician in its adult life we would need to accompany a hundred thousand babies in their transition into adults, with regular measures of the widest possible array of environmental factors, just to make calculations on a target sample of 10 (which is still a quiet small sample size). It is evident that such a study design is not feasible, especially since we do not expect our research question to be on top of our society's priority list to justify such an investment.

Thus, most studies advocating the position that musicality is inborn "rely" on case studies of famous musicians or on analyses of famous musicians' family trees. In the latter tradition, the example of the Bach family is one of the most (ab) used ones. However, as Helmut Rösing states it:

"But what is (...) presented as evidence for the heredity theory of musical talent, can also be interpreted completely differently. The fact that the male members of a family in their majority pursued the profession of a musician (the many female members who did not become musicians are never mentioned), can also be viewed completely differently. That is, that all from their earliest childhood grew up in an environment, in which playing music as a profession for men primed family life and educational focuses." (Rösing, 1992)

Motivational factors in music-making

There are however many empirical studies who focus on motivational factors which influence results in the educational process. Only little of this research is focused on music education. However, making a transfer from general academic activities to music education presents us new hypotheses for explaining the initially presented phenomenon that so many people "drop out" of active music-making. We will limit ourselves to present three approaches: Carol S. Dweck's Goal theory, intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation and self-handicapping.

Goal theory

Carol Dweck has discovered that implicit intelligence theories people hold (how we think about the nature of intelligence) and learning goals have a serious impact on the learning process. Learned helplessness (Dweck, 2000) refers to the experimental observation that some children upon negative feedback (following in reality too difficult tasks) become unable to solve easy tasks which they already had completed satisfactorily in the beginning of the experiment (Dweck, 2000; Dweck and Reppucci, 1973; Abramson et. al., 1978). Children who believe intelligence to be something fixed and inborn (in contrast to children who believe it to be malleable) hold more likely “performance goals”, that is, to get successful results (in opposition to being focused on learning and the process; “mastery goals”). Whereas negative feedback/failure is taken as a useful information and challenge for learning more by children who hold an incremental view of intelligence (intelligence can be learned), children with an entity view (intelligence is fixed) show learned helplessness and shun – when they are free to choose – new types of tasks which would include the risk of failure and stick to tasks which they already have completed successfully.

Thus, we could argue this way: due to shared social cognitions many people hold an entity view of musicality and formulate performance goals; people are often confronted with failure and negative feedback in the music education process; since failure would be for them an indicator of a low general intelligence they stay away from music making and choose easy tasks in other domains where they can show off.

Intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation

Intrinsic motivation refers to a state when one is motivated to perform a task simply by the enjoyment of it, whereas in extrinsic motivation the behavior is contingent upon the presence of a reward (material or psychological, e.g. positive feedback). There is empirical support for the hypothesis that a high intrinsic motivation is a requisite for becoming successful in the arts. A strong intrinsic motivator in music making can be the experience of “flow” (O’Neill, 1999; Csikszentmihalyi, 2004; Custodero, 2005). This, however, does not exclude, that people are in the same way also extrinsically motivated:

“It is not that these individuals (artists) do not care about extrinsic rewards, such as money and fame. Rather, they are task focused – they work because they enjoy it, and the money, fame, and other extrinsic rewards are pleasant by-products.” (Sternberg and Williams, 2002, p. 350)

An ingenious study by Wild, Enzle and Hawkins (1992) showed that piano students believing their teacher to be an intrinsically motivated volunteer performed later on more enthusiastically, joyously and innovatively than students who believed their teacher to be extrinsically motivated by pay. In fact, the teacher was in both conditions the same and himself not aware about how he was presented to each class.

Thus, being more intrinsically motivated and having teachers who are likewise can favor perseverance in music making, whereas being highly extrinsically motivated (e.g., to please one’s parents) and having teachers who themselves do

not intrinsically enjoy their playing and teaching can have a detrimental effect, especially when the individual does not get the needed degree of reward anymore.

Self-handicapping

The term coined by Berglas and Jones (*Jones and Berglas, 1978; Berglas, 1990; Berglas and Baumeister, 1994*) refers to the situation that people voluntarily invest less effort in an activity under conditions of uncertain outcomes to be later on able to attribute eventual failure to lack of effort and not to lack of ability. A typical example is declaring publicly before an exam: "I partied the whole night" or "I did not even read a single page, preferred playing computer games instead." Thus, individuals try to protect their self-image (in case of success being able to attribute it, in turn, to extremely high ability: "I get an A even without effort.")

In terms of learning music, we could argue that since being an exceptional or at least good musician is a very insecure outcome, many people do not engage seriously in practicing because an unfavorable outcome would highlight their low abilities. Not trying, one can still daydream saying "If I would invest time, I would easily become a great musician".

Conclusion

We live in a complex world, thus finding one absolute answer to our initial question why so many people disengage from active music making seems of high improbability. Since determining whether someone is born talented or not is almost impossible, we cannot state that inborn talent is needed in music, that this talent rarely appears and thus the majority correctly realizes that it lacks the necessary musicality and drops out.

Following the theory of Heinrich Jacoby and empirical studies (see *Ohrband, 2005*) we find evidence that many individuals drop out because they *believe* they lack talent, or because of traumatic experiences in music education.

Research on learning motivation indicates that perseverance or disengagement is moderated by factors like implicit intelligence theories, learning goals, intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation or the degree of self-handicapping. Often frustrated musicians become "shadow artists" (*Cameron, 1996*), seeking the proximity of musicians without themselves playing – physically or imaginary; this could be an alternative explanation for the high degree of teenagers' (and adults') identification with pop groups – apart from an explanation based on Social Identity Theory.

What to do if you yourself are a "shadow artist" or a blocked musician?

Heinrich Jacoby proposes – influenced by psychodynamic theory – to become aware of and relive traumatic experiences in music education and start anew as an adult by aware self-discovery of the instrument or one's own voice. In his workshops he successfully demonstrated how convinced "unmusical" adults could become very musical through a supporting environment, a receptive attitude and the right tasks.

Julia Cameron offers in her book "*The way of the artist*" a highly recommendable self-help course in twelve weeks for "blocked artists" which works with techniques like expressive writing (compare to *Pennebaker, 1997*), visualizations and affirmations.

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