

7b. Personality and Musicians

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It is a common assumption that there is something slightly different about musicians compared to other people; we tend to think that musicians are more creative and that they have something we call ‘musical talent’. We also tend to assume that they are able to express their thoughts and feelings through their music, and that they enjoy performing in front of audiences. Who do you think would be more spontaneous and fun; an electric guitarist in a rock band, or a harpsicordist in a chamber orchestra? We tend to have rather specific stereotypes about musicians from different genres (for example rock musicians vs. classical musicians), and specific assumptions about individuals who play certain instruments. But is there any truth behind these stereotypes? Does being a professional musician require certain personality characteristics, or do the years of musical training shape musicians’ personalities to a particular direction? It is useful to understand the motivational drives of those who want to become musicians: What are their reasons and motivations for pursuing music as a career, and what aspects of musicianship do they experience as rewarding? Recognizing the special characteristic of individuals who want to pursue music as a professional pathway can also help to improve the education and support of young, developing musicians. **This chapter will** Do musicians differ from the average person? Do different types of musicians, whether trumpet players or guitarists, differ from each other? Research on the psychology of music has considered personality differences, along with other differences between musicians, such as emotional dispositions, social skills, and the likelihood that they will experience anxiety during a performance. ~~will also be covered.~~

Personality Characteristics of Musicians

Personality traits are central for understanding and characterizing individual differences in behaviour, emotions, and patterns of thought. One of the most widely accepted ways of describing personality is the so-called Big Five personality theory,

which differentiates between five broad trait dimensions: Extraversion, Neuroticism, Agreeableness, Openness to Experience, and Conscientiousness (for more information on the Big Five personality traits, see the chapter on “Personality and Listeners”). Do musicians differ from the average person in terms of their personality traits, and if so, how? First, let us consider what it means to be a ‘musician’. There is no single or easily definable category of musicianship, since the degree of musical training and engagement in musical activities may vary greatly from one musician to the next. For example, some rock musicians may have no formal musical training, but engage in daily practice and regular performance, and have years of informal learning. At the other end of the spectrum, one might have highly trained individuals with 15+ years of formal musical training, who do not work as musicians and only rarely engage in musical activities. Studies investigating the personality characteristics of musicians have tended to focus on those working as professional musicians (either in the domain of classical or popular music), and on music students. Thus, the research findings mainly reflect the personality patterns of professional musicians and of those studying to become professional musicians.

Being a professional musician poses conflicting demands on an individual’s personality characteristics. On one hand, becoming a proficient musician requires hours and hours of solitary, focused practice on a daily basis, which is something that introverts (individuals with low extraversion) thrive in. On the other hand, an important part of being a professional musician is performing in front of large audiences, which is a situation where highly extraverted people feel more comfortable in. These diverging requirements may attract individuals with very specific personality characteristics, but they can also have detrimental effects on the long-term wellbeing of professional musicians.

Broadly speaking, most musicians can be roughly characterized as ‘bold **introverts**’. A bold introvert is someone who is unlikely to be the life of the party, loudly telling stories to the entire room, but instead has an inner confidence in themselves and in what they are doing. In other words, they are independent, detached and self-sufficient, but not serious or shy. While introversion helps with sustaining the extended periods of solitary practice, it can also make individuals more prone to feelings of anxiety (see the section on personality and performance anxiety later in

this chapter). Interestingly, research has found that self-discipline and sustained interest in music are more important than actual musical aptitude or ‘musicality’ in determining successful musical attainment in childhood. Indeed, introversion is a beneficial trait from this perspective, since it supports the long hours of concentrated practice required. Musicians also tend to be more **Open to Experience** than the general population, meaning they are imaginative and curious, and appreciate variety and aesthetic experiences. In contrast, people who are not open to experience can seem “closed-minded” because they are not receptive to new ideas or experiences.

One way of gaining a better understanding of the links between personality and musicianship is to look at how these links develop over time, and whether you can see similar patterns in music students as well. For example, individuals who enrol for musical training tend to have higher scores in Openness to Experience to begin with, but they also tend to have better-educated parents. It is difficult to tease apart the causal relationships here; in other words, it is difficult to establish whether those with high Openness to Experience are more likely to undertake musical training, or whether both musical training and Openness to Experience are related to a third factor such as the parents’ education level. In any case, it is probably safe to say that those individuals who carry on studying music tend to be interested in learning and gaining new experiences in general. Unsurprisingly, musicians have also been found to be more creative and prone to divergent thinking and sensation-seeking compared to the general population. These observations align well with the stereotypes regarding people working in the creative sector. But working as a musician might also require an aptitude for interacting fluently with other people (musically and otherwise), as well as an ability to effectively express a variety of different emotions. Indeed, it has been established that musicians tend to have strong social and interpersonal skills, and some studies have also found that musicians score higher in emotional intelligence and empathy compared to the average person.

Personalities of Different Kinds of Musicians

The broad personality characteristics outlined in the previous section apply mostly to classical musicians (or classical music students), since they have been the target of investigation in most studies looking at personality and musicianship. However,

musicians working within popular music genres such as rock and pop are somewhat different, partly because the genres themselves carry certain cultural norms (such as different performance and practice conventions) that have different implications for personality characteristics. Overall, research has found that – compared to the general population – rock and popular musicians tend to score higher in neuroticism and openness to experiences, and lower in agreeableness and conscientiousness. Interestingly, rock musicians have been found to be more extraverted than classical musicians, probably reflecting the difference in the relative importance of performance vs. solitary practice in the two genres. Concerts and interaction with audiences plays a bigger role in popular music genres, while long hours of solitary practice form the core of a classical musician's work. Due to these different emphases, introverts and extraverts are perhaps attracted to different genres, and to different aspects of music-making.

So far, this chapter has reviewed the personality differences between musicians and non-musicians, and between classical and popular musicians. But what about musicians playing particular instruments, or composers, conductors, or music teachers? There certainly exist some well-established personality- and gender stereotypes in terms of instrument choice in the domain of both classical and popular music, but are these stereotypes also reflected in the actual personality characteristics of string and brass players at orchestras, for example? Research has found that string players tend to be more introverted, while brass players and percussionists tend to be more extraverted. This pattern fits well with the typical roles of these instrument groups in symphony orchestras, where individual brass and percussion players have more prominent roles than string players who are part of larger sections. String instruments can also be considered technically more demanding, requiring longer periods of solitary practice. However, it is difficult to establish whether people's personalities affect their instrument choice, or whether playing a particular instrument shapes an individual's personality to a direction determined by the typical roles and demands attached to that instrument.

The typical personality profiles of composers and music teachers follow similar intuitive patterns. Composers, for instance, have been found to be the most introverted out of all musicians, whereas music teachers are even more extraverted than the

general population. These differences reflect the varying roles and forms of musicianship. While there is considerable variation within any given category of musicianship, it may be that musicians have gravitated towards their preferred professional practice – be it composers, ensemble musicians, soloists, or educators – because of the way these tasks fit with their natural ways of engaging with others.

Personality and Performance Anxiety

Most professional musicians have experienced some level of performance anxiety while performing, and it has been estimated that 25-35% of professional musicians suffer from severe performance anxiety that impairs their work and wellbeing. Importantly, certain personality traits - namely neuroticism and introversion – are associated with an increased sensitivity to performance anxiety. As discussed in the chapter on Personality and Listeners, neuroticism is a personality trait associated with an increased tendency to experience negative emotions such as worry and anxiety. Thus, it is not surprising that neuroticism is also associated with the tendency to experience performance anxiety in musical performance situations. The link between introversion and performance anxiety relates back to the dual, conflicting demands of musicianship: On one hand, introversion helps with sustaining focus during the long hours of practice, but on the other, it makes individuals more prone to experience performance anxiety in concert situations.

Introversion is not associated with negative emotionality or anxiety-proneness per se, but it is associated with an individual's capacity to tolerate external stimulation. Extraverts are outgoing and sociable, and they thrive in environments with high levels of stimulation. For example, many extraverts find it easier to concentrate when there is noise or music in the background, as it helps to raise their arousal levels. Introverts, on the other hand, find it easier to focus in silence, and they are easily disturbed by background noise. Psychologists think this is due to introverts and extraverts having differing levels of optimal arousal; extraverts need more stimulation to raise their arousal levels close to optimum, whereas introverts are easily over-stimulated. In the context of musical performance, the performance event can be considered a highly stimulating situation. Since extraverts are able to tolerate higher levels of stimulation without becoming over-stimulated (and might even perform better as the result of

increased arousal levels), they often experience performance situations as positive and exciting. Introverts, on the other hand, can easily exceed their optimal levels of arousal in such situations, and over-arousal can have negative effects on their performance. However, the level of optimal arousal also depends on the demandingness of the task at hand. The more demanding the task, the lower the optimal level of arousal is (and vice versa). For example, if one is performing a very familiar and easy piece of music, the level of optimal arousal would be higher than in the case of a very difficult, complex piece of music.

While personality traits such as neuroticism and introversion are associated with the tendency to experience performance anxiety, the most important contributors to music performance anxiety are self-esteem and self-efficacy. Self-esteem refers to an individual's overall attitude towards (and respect for) oneself, while self-efficacy reflects an individual's beliefs about his/her abilities and capabilities. Research has found that the self-esteem of musicians and music students is directly linked to how well they perform in their work and studies, suggesting that musicians may find it difficult to separate their self-image from their musical abilities. Low self-esteem and low self-efficacy are associated with high performance anxiety, but it is not clear whether low self-esteem leads to anxiety, or whether anxiety causes low self-esteem. It may be that high anxiety leads to worse performance in concerts, which again leads to lower self-esteem, for example. In any case, it would be beneficial for musicians' and music students' health and wellbeing if professional music training involved more effective performance coaching and learning about strategies to mitigate negative performance anxiety.

Conclusion

In summary, the average personality profile of musicians and music students tends to differ somewhat from the general population. Moreover, there are personality differences between different types of musicians, relating to type of music or instruments they play, and the type of role (such as performing, teaching, or composing) they find most appealing. While cause-and-effect relationships are difficult to establish when it comes to personality and other individual differences, it is more likely that people's personality predispositions influence their motivations

and drives (and thus their hobbies and career pathways) rather than music-making or musical training making individuals different. However, there is also emerging evidence showing that musical training may have a positive effect on certain social traits, such as empathic ability. Thus, while musical activities and careers might be particularly attractive to certain types of people, it may also be that musical activities reinforce and shape their individual characteristics to a certain extent.

References and Further Readings

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