

The Public Performance – Impact to Music Learning in Conservatoire Tradition¹

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Introduction

Today, most specialist music schools like conservatoires keep adopting a model that emerged in the 19th century. Instrumental teaching is based predominantly upon one-to-one lessons, and teachers expect their students to become performers or at least guide them having that goal in mind. However, from those that become competent enough to play a musical instrument, only few acquire and develop performance skills. These skills include the ability to control skilfully their anxiety, to convey their full attention to the performance itself and, to let the memory unfold freely without any kind of disruptive thoughts (Davidson, 1997).

One of the reasons that might explain the small number of students that develop performance skills seems to be related to the nature of teaching and practising. A model based on individual tuition and individualized practice seems to defy the development of stage skills and, apparently, does not provide the appropriate preparation to the challenges of public performance (Davies & Pulman, 2001, p. 251).

Thus, several questions take place: what is really making difference to those few that turn out to be skilful performers? What is their key to success in acquiring performance skills? Can teachers do anything to help students achieve performance skills? Or is this just a matter of innate talent to be on stage?

Literature Review

Research suggests that performance experiences may change the way students see themselves thru music. Hewitt (2004) reported that prior performing experiences could

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influence the way 'students saw themselves as performers' (p.51). This is in accordance with O'Neill's perspective about the construction of the self. This process is anchored on feelings of consistency and continuity that result from looking back and analyse the patterns of individual behaviours and experiences (O'Neill & McPherson, 2002, p. 91). Therefore, this suggests that we should consider as plausible the link between successful music learners and the accumulated successful performance experiences. Success in past experiences may have provided the necessary motivation when it came to choose a career. Inversely, accumulated negative performance experiences may have influenced some students to drop out music school.

One key to generate a successful performance is in the preparation that students make. Research suggests that successful performances are likely to happen to those students that combine both mental and physical activities, although there is little evidence of specific performance preparation among them (Hallam, 2001; Papagiorgi, 2007; Papagiorgi et al., 2007). On the other side, skilled musicians are said to develop 'preparation routines' which include deep immersion in musical, physical, and mental preparation one or two days before a performance. Later, on the performance day, they are said to strive 'to feel excited and ready to perform, yet not too anxious', reaching a state of optimal arousal for concert performance. This is only possible with 'systematic, patient effort' (Connolly & Williamon, 2004, p. 232).

One of the major issues when it comes to performance is: anxiety. Research refers that the level of anxiety is significantly higher on the days of performance and examination (Hallam, 2001; Ryan, 2005). More, anxiety may be manifested simply by the presence of an audience (LeBlanc et al., 1997). However, it seems possible to control and even overcome these anxiety symptoms. According to researchers, two effective tools to achieve this are, again, to "build up a bank of successful [performance] experiences", and to "have plenty of performance opportunities", (Davidson, 2002, p. 99; Hewitt, 2004, p. 50).

Survey (Methodology)

In order to understand better the impact of public performance experiences to the success of musical learning within the context of specialist music schools, it was designed a survey that had the participation of 42 students (aged between 8 and 12), 43

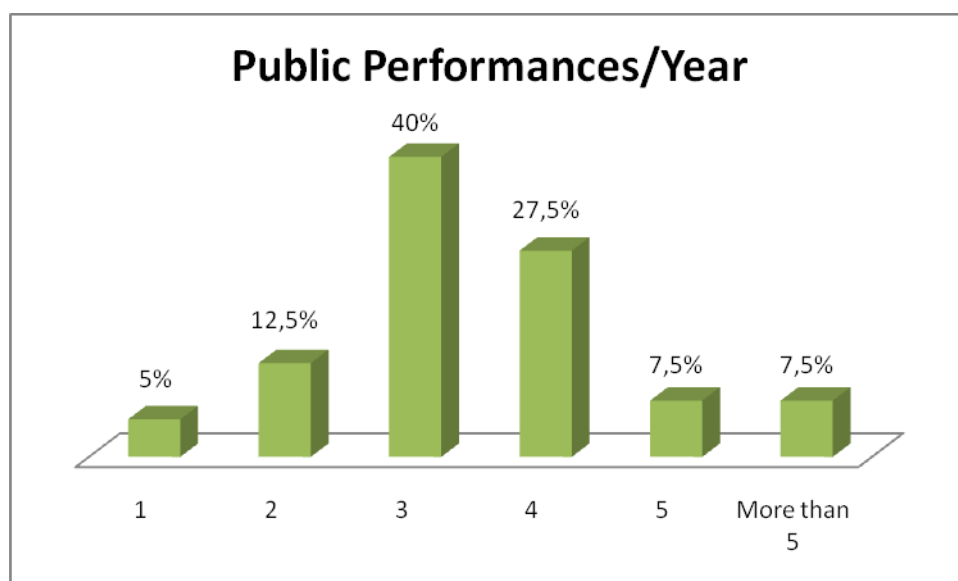
parents, and 44 instrumental teachers from Conservatoires and other Portuguese specialist music schools, that follow the same 19th century instructional model.

This research was designed to find out if the quantity and quality of accumulated performance experiences produced changes in students' identity in music. One another goal was to understand how performance experiences affected their self-beliefs and internal motivation.

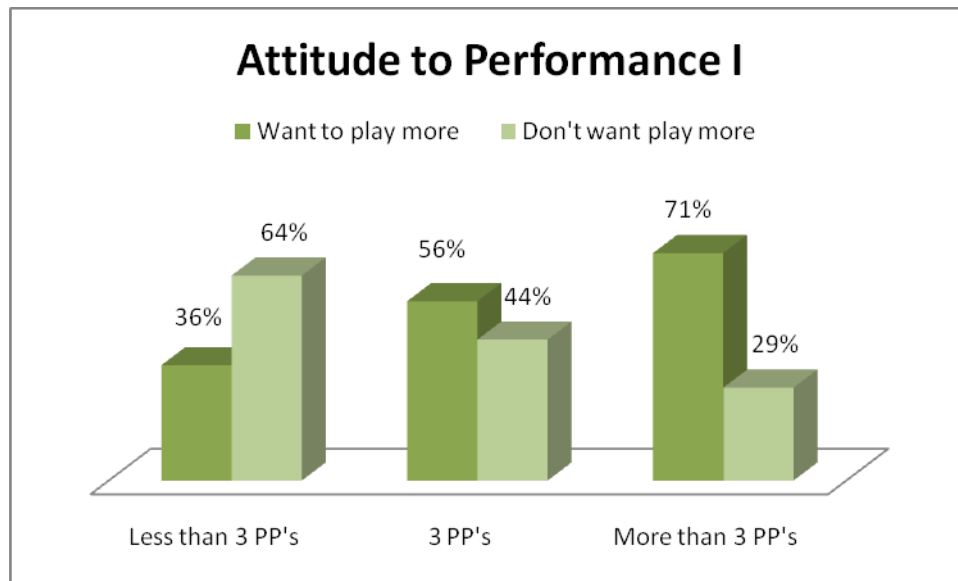
The questionnaires were designed using both closed and open-ended questions. The resulting data was analysed using both exploratory and confirmatory approaches, following a non-linear path, using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Further qualitative analysis was carried out using One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Tests, looking for effects in terms of the quality of sample distribution; using One-way ANOVA (Analysis of Variance), looking for effects in terms of significance between variables; and using Pearson's rho, Spearman's rho, and Kendall's tau_b, looking for effects in terms of correlation between variables.

Results

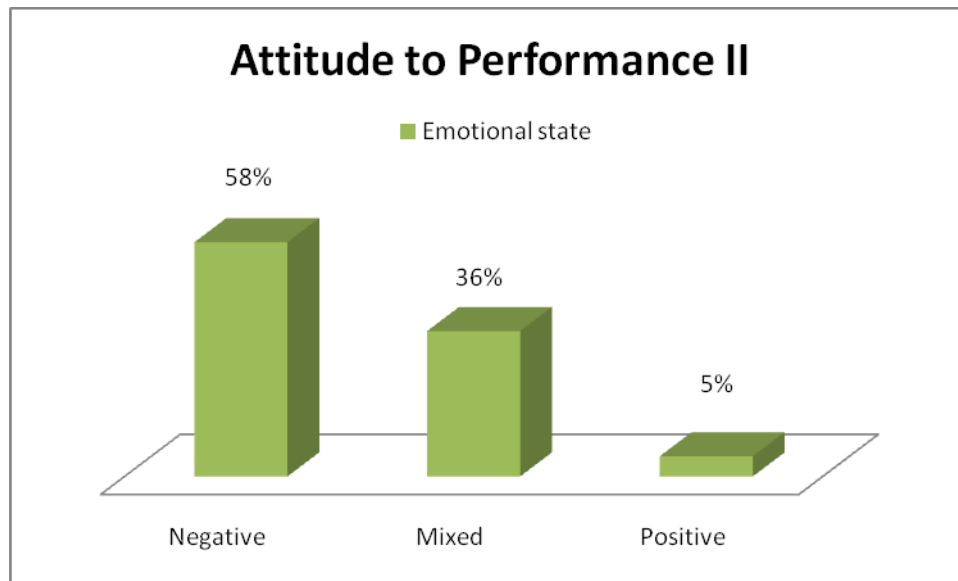
Within the students surveyed, most of them reported to make three stage presentations each year, and 42.5% reported to exceed this number. These results represent a change in Portuguese teaching tradition that for decades promoted a single performance per year.



However, the question here is about the eventual relevance of increasing performance activity, and this seems to be a very important aspect of instrumental learning, particularly because results suggest, as we can see in the graphic, a correlation between the amount of performances made each year and students' attitudes to performance. It is visible a crescendo of students' determination to play more times as they report to play more often.



Additionally, the question about the attitude to performance can be observed in another angle, looking thru the emotional state reported within the short time frame prior to performance. It was found, then, that during the period of time (days or weeks) that preceded performance events, most students (58%) tended to show a systematic negative emotional state. The words used by most students to describe their feelings during this period of time were: stressed, worried, tense, afraid to fail. On the other side, only 5% of students revealed a systematic positive emotional state within this period of time.



These results confirm, in the first place, previous research claims about increasing anxiety during the time that preceded performance. However, we have to question ourselves about the impact of this systematic negative attitude to the success of the performance itself, and to the necessary development of intrinsic motivation.

If the balance between the performance experience itself (or the sum of previous experiences) and the emotional distress felt days or weeks before is not positive, this probably won't generate internal will (motivation) which is necessary to keep on acquiring instrumental skills and learning music. The result of this situation may be, in a relevant number of cases, reflected in their decision to drop out.

It was also interesting to find out a correlation between the students' emotional state in the prior days to performance and their reported will to perform more often. Those students revealing a systematic positive emotional state in the days prior to performance reported to desire to perform more often, while those students that revealed a systematic negative emotional state reported avoidance feelings.²

One another question investigated within this piece of research was related with performance preparation, with physical routines. The analysis of teachers and parents questionnaires allowed us to see that, as a performance event got closer, there was a visible change of routines among students. One of the reported changes was the

² This is supported by a linear association between these two variables was moderate and positive [Pearsons's rho = 0.454, sig = 0.000], which was statistically significant with one error type I of 0.01.

increasing amount of time spent practising. This result suggests another possible benefit of increasing the number of stage presentations, particularly the contribution to the increment of students' practice routines.

One central question to this research was related with the impact of successful and negative performances to instrumental learning. Thus, students were asked to reveal the kind of internal feedback they used to give themselves after successful and negative performances.

Results suggest that students' self-feedback following a successful performance comes in the form of intense praise (65%). Examples were given such as 'I made it!', 'Bravo!', 'Yes! Congratulations!'. Other kinds of positive reinforcement clearly put this successful performance in perspective, as part of a long-term plan (17.5%). Examples of this type of response included 'now I need to keep this level of success', or 'if I keep on playing this way I can go far'.

Dealing with the experience of failure, about 42% suggested feelings of moderate disappointment mixed with the projection of what to do to avoid similar situations in the future and reflecting positive expectations to the next performance opportunity. Examples of this type of response were 'I need to be more focused and less nervous', 'I have to improve my performance', 'Next time it will be better' or 'I have to practice more'. However, 22% adopted an extremely hard and negative discourse: for example - 'I'm awful', 'I really am a lousy violinist' or 'I was rubbish'.

These results reinforce the suggestion that public performances may have deep impact on the construction of an Identity in Music (Hargreaves et al., 2003). While success in performance seems to contribute to raise self-esteem and self-concept, failure seems to produce sufficient power to ruin the chances of developing intrinsic motivation. The idea of continuity reported after successful performances suggest its contribution to the development of musical identity and intrinsic motivation. Inversely, negative performances seemed to affect deeply the establishment of long-term goals in music and consequently the acquisition of an identity in music as a performer.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the results of this research suggest that the role of public performance within instrumental teaching in specialist music schools must be discussed.

Usually, public performances are seen, particularly at lower levels of instruction, as occasions to promote the work of teachers, to justify parents' investment, or as good opportunities to challenge students' abilities. However, the results presented here suggest that public performance may well be used as learning tool.

If instrumental teachers give students more opportunities to play, this will probably contribute to increase the amount of time spent practising, which would help to partially solve the recurrent problem of insufficient practice so many times cited by teachers. This increment in public performances would also provide the necessary opportunities needed to develop stage skills, and to learn how to deal with the non-desirable anxiety that so frequently inhibits the quality of performance.

The deep emotions derived from success or failure in performance may produce one of two possible effects:

- Positive: generate intrinsic motivation, mould students self-concept helping them to develop an identity in music as performer, help reducing performance anxiety or;
- Negative: increasing uncontrolled anxiety, delay the development of intrinsic motivation, or even mould students' self-concept in a way that increases the fears of public exposure as musician, and ruining the chances of raising an identity as performer

Thus, instrumental teachers should help students to build up a bank of positive memories related to public performance. This means that teachers should work in order to ensure that most of students' performances are somehow successful (and understood as so).

This could be done, firstly, by enabling them to play only when they are ready to produce a successful performance. In practice, this might represent the need to re-schedule a new performance opportunity for few students, and to hold back eventual parental pressure. Secondly, after a negative performance, teachers could give students a second opportunity, probably to play the same repertoire, in a short period of time. This would help students to restrain the development of avoidance feelings and to replace the image of failure by the image of success.

Due to its relevance to the success in instrumental learning, to the internalization of long-term goals related to music performance and to the raise of more proficient performers, which are the main goals of instrumental teachers and specialist music schools, public performance deserve to be looked differently by instrumental teachers.

Although the age-scope of this research was short, it is my belief that, even if problems with adolescence may bring new variables to this set, public performances may produce a similar emotional impact on older students, keeping the related variables producing similar results to those presented here today.

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