The Musician's Tug of War

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Abstract: The Musician’s Tug of War

The lives of musicians are filled with difficult choices and battles. Often, the most prominent battle they face is the tug of war between technique and passion. This essay explores this tug of war through juxtaposing the aura of the practice rooms during the day with the aura of the practice rooms at night. The author analyzes the influence of these differing auras on the creativity, artistry, and overall mindsets of music students. She utilizes her observations of the Frost School of Music practice rooms, the observations of other music students, and the evidence from a scientific study on the body’s productivity throughout the day. To synthesize this information, she describes her personal experience as a music student, her struggle with balancing technical perfection and creative passion, and the way in which the healing aura of the practice rooms at night helped her solidify her artistic identity.
As I walk to my morning ensemble class, I find myself surrounded by the slamming of piano keys and the sound of perfectionist frustration. I am unable to separate one student’s music from another, for it all seems to blend together into overwhelming noise. The practice rooms at the Frost School of Music, which are anything but soundproof, are filled to the brim with students and their intensity. At night, however, the noise around me begins to fade into music. The individuality of songs and the overall love for the craft become more audible as artistic identities come out of their shadows. A musician’s career is a tug of war between rigorous technique and passionate creativity. Both are equally important and cannot stand on their own. However, it is so easy to fixate on technical perfection and tune out the mind’s desperate call for artistry. While the intense aura of technical perfection in practice rooms during the day is vital in music excellence, the mysterious serenity of the practice rooms at night may provide the balance music students need to develop creativity, passion, and unique artistic identities.
The practice room building can be compared to a residence. For many students, the amount of time spent in this building allows them to call it their home. Like a home, the hustle and bustle of its residents during the day is quite loud and hectic. Once most of the household members go to sleep, the few people that remain awake have the tranquility and silence needed to achieve better mental clarity. It is necessary to for music students to take advantage of the tranquil practice rooms at night to maintain this mental clarity, for failing to take the time for this type of reflection can be self-destructive. Former music student, Madeline Bruser, writes that she remembers “being in music school and walking around looking through the little windows and doors of the practice rooms. In every room a student was going full steam at his or her instrument without stopping, like a locomotive. Rarely did anyone allow a minute’s pause for reflection or relaxation” (Bruser 18). This reflection allows music students to remember the love
they have for their instruments. “As young children, we hear music with freshness and delight. We fall in love with the simplest song. But when we start practicing an instrument, we stop listening intently. We become so involved with producing sound that we forget to take it in” (Bruser 12). Students become so used to drilling scales and exercises into their fingers that they forget to appreciate the magic of melody, harmony, and the way in which lyrics intertwine to create meaningful messages. At night, the students’ ability to better appreciate this magic allows them to view music practice as less of a frustrating obligation and more of an emotional escape.

The ability of music students to achieve better mental clarity at night not only depends on their calm surroundings; their productive creativity can be determined by the way in which their bodies function. “The human body has its own internal timing and everyone’s body rhythm may vary significantly.” This internal timing is called the body’s “circadian rhythm” (Wang and Chern 203). According to a study comparing the creativity and circadian rhythms of art students and management students, about 27 percent of art students felt the most creative between the hours of midnight and 2am. This percentage was the largest of the study. In comparison, a mere 9 percent of management students felt creative between these hours (Wang and Chern 207).

Unfortunately, many schooling systems do not take these differences into account when creating schedules and instituting closing hours. The University of Miami provides study spaces with late hours including the lobby of the Shalala Center, and the Richter Library, which is open for 24 hours during finals week. On the other hand, the Foster practice room building closes at midnight, which is the start of the ideal time for creativity. If universities were to recognize the need for longer practice room hours, music students might achieve the clarity and creative reflection needed to take their careers to new heights.
The inability to balance out the perfectionist mindset of the day with the serene passion of the night presents music students with the risk of getting lost. My first month at Frost was like a shiny new dream that I believed I would stay in forever. Obsession with perfect technique was glorified. Starting from 8am till the sunset, I would continuously visit the practice rooms to drill technique into my fingers. While I noticed myself becoming more proficient at my instruments, I felt my artistic identity slowly begin to slip from my grasp. I felt like a robot who got trapped in the fast-paced intensity of music school stress, moving swiftly through the motions without time to ponder my direction. I forgot to find my balance. I forgot how vital it was to remind myself why I endure the intense classes and long practice hours; I forgot about the immense love I hold
for my craft. Eventually, my frustration built up to the point where I knew a wake up call was inevitable. A wake up call wakes people up from their dreams, but this wake up call allowed me to slip back into the joy of mine. I still continuously drill technique into my fingers, for I would not be able to achieve greatness without this type of practice. The difference now is that I take the time to fall in love with my creativity and artistry. Whether it is through songwriting about the day’s chaotic events till midnight, or even walking back from the practice rooms to the dorms under the serene night sky, I hold my artistic identity tightly in my hands.

The tug of war between the strenuous technical practice of the day and the creative practice of the night does not need to remain a tug of war. If students take advantage of the practice rooms’ vastly different auras and utilize them to find their inner balance, music can become their journey to both artistic excellence and identity. Just as students practice technical exercises, they can practice their creativity and passion as well. Once students’ already existing passion and creativity are emphasized, they will better appreciate the process of practicing. After all, it is the love of the process that drives musicians to success.
Works Cited
