Music Education, Recording Technology, And The Illusion Of Perfection

Jennifer Blackwell, MM

© Jennifer Blackwell 2013, jenniferamblackwell@gmail.com
Copyright Notice: The policy of GEMS is that authors will retain copyright to their materials.

Abstract: This paper investigates professional music recordings and their effect on the physical and psychological well being of music students. Feminist theories that explore eating disorders and body shame in relation to the modeling industry are used as a framework for comparison to the effects of the doctoring of music recordings on performance anxiety amongst musicians. The effects of music performance anxiety are compared to similar effects on women in a cultural environment that assesses them based solely on their bodies. The editing of recordings is compared to edited images in the beauty industry. This comparison suggests that professionally recorded music may not be the best model of performance for students. Suggestions are given for alternate models such as live performances, recordings of live performances, and peer listening.
Regardless of genre, style, or specialization, music educators commonly assert the importance of one thing: listening. The student is encouraged to experience as many high-caliber performances as possible, and the most accessible way to do so is through professional recordings. This has remained a largely unquestioned teaching strategy since recordings have become readily available; in many ways, it just seems logical to use the best available versions of compositions to set the standard for musical goals (Garofalo, 1983). This well-intentioned teaching strategy is problematic, however, because recordings are often edited beyond the ability levels of the performers showcased in them (Hamilton, 2003). The extent to which a recording can be altered to achieve a sort of musical perfection is quite staggering, but this remains a secret of sorts, particularly within the realm of classical music. Recordings are created to “screen out allegedly contingent imperfections of live performance” thus “hiding” any mistakes or flaws that would otherwise be present in a live performance (Hamilton, 2003). Thus, the final product is presented as if it is possible for that performer to play flawlessly, when in fact there are many behind-the-scenes processes involved in achieving such a high-quality result.

To understand the problem of unrealistic standards and edited musical products, the modeling industry can act as a useful parallel. Feminists have thoroughly addressed the problem of doctoring for perfection in relation to the modeling industry, as image editing is both prevalent and has been extensively studied (Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). Much can be learned from their analyses for application in music education, as the consequences of presenting edited recordings to students have not been equally analyzed, but may have similar effects. It is important to consider the effects of teaching strategies, as they can impact both the effectiveness of teaching and the overall well being of students. The presentation of ideal recorded performances as models for student achievement has been under evaluated, and thus must be further studied, as it continues to be the standard method of performance modeling in many classrooms (Linklater, 1997).

Aural And Visual Orientation

It is important to address that the modeling industry is particularly well suited to cause anxiety and shame, because of the visual orientation of modern society (Soh, 2009). Because western society emphasizes the visual, physical appearance is extremely important in social interactions and our perceptions of other people (Jay, 1994). People are quickly judged based on their appearance and body language, with less importance placed on the input of the other senses. This would suggest that within mainstream society the aural sense would be less powerful in constructing societal standards, and thus less capable of producing the anxiety associated with visual standards. There is evidence, however, suggesting that musicians are more aurally oriented in their learning than the general population. Studies suggest that students who are initially taught to play music through a traditional, visual approach (i.e., reading music) are generally inefficient in their ability to comprehend music, both from notation and aurally (McPherson, Davidson, & Faulkner, 2012). Because musicians exhibit a stronger than average aural orientation, this suggests that they could also be more susceptible to the aural pressures associated with musical perfectionism. This is not to say that the aural orientation of musicians outweighs their visual orientation, but rather that aural cues carry more weight than would otherwise be assumed. This suggests that both aural and visual standards can hold significant influence for the performing musician.

Visual and aural beauty also share similarities in terms of social standards—namely, they are culturally oriented and narrowly defined. In Western culture, a standard of physical beauty is defined by mass media. The characteristics thought of as beautiful are both naturally rare and difficult to achieve, and are presented to the public by select beauty models. Similarly, recordings present an idealized standard for students. Women who feel the pressure to conform to these physical standards frequently feel body shame, which is a result of comparing themselves to the cultural standards and failing to meet them (Moradi, Dirks, & Matteson, 2005). Most people cannot conform to these beauty ideals, even if they wanted to. The same is true of musicians—the standards set for professional musicians are unattainable by the vast majority of the population. Musicians frequently
experience performance anxiety, which is a symptom of fearing failure or feeling unable to perform at a certain level (Robertson & Eisensmith, 2010). Moreover, the aesthetic ideals of aural beauty in music are also relative to culture and narrowly defined. Standards of visual beauty have evolved and changed over time, much in the same way that musical standards for tone, style, phrasing and other aesthetic considerations have. Since extreme and unrealistic standards are prevalent in both visual and aural ideals, they are sufficiently similar to warrant comparison.

The Modeling Industry And The Myth of Perfection

Feminists have been quite successful in documenting the impacts of the modeling industry on women as a source of anxiety and various disorders (Thompson & Heinberg, 1997). Their insights are of particular value for musicians and music education, because students are presented with aural ideals that are relevantly similar to beauty industry products. In the modeling industry, women (and men) of unusual height, weight, and appearance are chosen to act as the symbols of beauty in society. These people are already recognized as exceptionally attractive in relation to western culture, but they are also given the benefit of extensive makeup, lighting, and photo editing to enhance their appearance. Unfortunately, however, when a magazine presents a model, there is no acknowledgment of the extensive procedures involved in making her “perfect.” Kevin Thompson and Leslie Heinberg (1999) help to explain this in research on the relationship between body image and eating disorders. As he warns, models presented to the viewing public are subject to:

Photographic techniques such as airbrushing, soft-focus cameras, composite figures, editing, and filters may blur the realistic nature of media images even further, leading consumers to believe that the models the viewers see through the illusions these techniques create are realistic representations of actual people rather than carefully manipulated, artificially developed images. (p. 340)

Images of these unnaturally attractive women are shown as the aesthetic ideal, and their level of beauty is perceived by many women as attainable, due to the marketing surrounding those images. Moreover, since women are routinely judged by their appearance alone, the importance of meeting beauty standards is intensified. According to objectification theory, the life experiences of women frequently include episodes of sexual objectification, which transform women from whole people into bodies, body parts, or body functions (Moradi, Dirks, & Matteson 2005, 420). This implies that beautiful models are more valued as people, because their beauty represents the entirety of their importance as human beings. Moreover, since the doctoring of these images is only tacitly acknowledged, they are not socially rejected as unnatural. If models were perceived as “fake,” their images would be less influential, but there is also pressure to be beautiful in order to be accepted in society, no matter what the cost. Thus, women are pressured to fit into this narrow definition of beauty.

Unfortunately, the standards of beauty presented by these models are plainly unhealthy. As Kevin Thompson and Leslie Heinberg (1999) notes, the ideal model is a teenage girl who is 5’7” tall, weighs 100 pounds, and is a size 5. This is unrealistic, extreme, and dangerous for the vast majority of the population, as the body mass index for a person of these proportions is less than 16, which is in the anorexic range.

Presenting tall, impossibly thin, artificially beautiful women as the standard for the female aesthetic is fundamentally damaging to young women who cannot live up to it. It has been noted that with increased exposure to media such as soap operas and music videos (in which beauty ideals are put on display), young women express greater body dissatisfaction, body image problems, and restrictive or disordered eating patterns (Thompson & Heinberg, 1999, p. 342). Indeed, body shame is often a key predictor in the development of eating disorders (Moradi, Dirks, & Matteson 2005).

Of course, there is a commercial motivation for creating a culture of unrealistic beauty standards. The beauty industry relies on the myth that models are simply ordinary people, who benefit from the beauty products that they use or endorse. As Leora Tanenbaum (2002) notes:
The celebrity machine wants ordinary people to believe that the glamour can rub off on us. Thus, untold numbers of women mistakenly believe they can achieve the same look as celebrities. Millions of women waste precious resources, including self-worth, following the diet and beauty tips of the stars. (p. 89)

Of course, celebrities and models have entire teams of people to make them look beautiful, but that strategy is unrealistic for the average person, and thus not profitable. By creating an unattainable standard that seems possible, the beauty industry ensures the sale of magazines and products that claim to make the dream a reality. One can draw parallels to very similar problems that occur in music when performance training becomes a quest for perfection, which, it could be argued, is illusory.

The Recording Industry And The Myth of Perfection

While similar to the anxiety faced by women in relation to models, the anxiety of musicians in relation to recorded music has not been sufficiently evaluated. Recordings are edited to an extent that may be compared to modeling photographs; this is important when considering the negative impact these recordings can have on students. When students are asked to listen to a recording, the multiple takes, edits, and alterations that take place before the recording is considered of professional quality are not generally mentioned. Because this process is not made readily apparent, students may believe that they are expected to play to that level in live performance. Just as “beauty media” can seriously impact women’s self-esteem, recordings can also negatively affect the self-worth of musicians. Paul Lehrer (1987) notes the negative effects that recordings can have with respect to the development of stage fright and performance anxiety:

Demands for perfection are particularly problematic for musicians or actors. Compounding this problem is the fact that today’s musicians can compare their own live performances with recorded performances by the greatest artists-performances that may have been dubbed and redubbed numerous times, yielding a standard of perfection that rarely is possible for anyone in a live performance. (p. 147)

Comparing a recording to a live performance is obviously problematic, yet it is frequently the primary standard for performance evaluation.

Among the technologies currently available to edit the quality of a recording, one of the most prominent is Auto-Tune. This technology can alter an out-of-tune pitch to conform to the closest in-tune pitch, thus eliminating any pitch errors (Diaz, 2009). The technology was originally designed to make the recording process faster and more cost efficient by fixing minor errors, but it has gradually become a crutch for performing difficult passages while sounding pitch-perfect. For the performer, it can become an easy way out of difficult sections. As Joe Diaz (2009) notes from his conversations with a sound engineer:

It [modifying the pitch] usually ends up just like plastic surgery. You haul out Auto-Tune to make one thing better, but then it’s very hard to resist the temptation to spruce up the whole vocal, give everything a little nip-tuck. (p. 6)

This technology has some serious ethical implications, in that it allows performers of a lower caliber to present themselves as extremely accurate artists. If educators hold students to these high standards of performance, the actual ability levels of these performers, not just their recording quality, must be considered.

Much like the beauty industry, the music business can reap economic benefits by creating a culture of inferiority. In order to meet the standards of high-calibre recording artists, method books, how-to guides, and multimedia programs are designed to help the average performer become the exceptional performer. This is not to say that these aids do not work, at least to some extent, and students do often need guidance for improvement. It is important to note that the same is likely true for the beauty industry: the products sold can often make women appear more beautiful, according to society’s narrow definition of what constitutes beauty. The fact remains that being effective tools for attaining society’s standards does
not make them less commercial or more beneficial in alleviating the anxiety involved in meeting those standards. Acknowledging the ways in which companies manipulate insecurities in order to sell products is essential in solving such problems.

Although the recording artist has had the benefit of many takes, editing, and mixing (much like the editing applied to photographs of models), live performances are expected to be of a similar standard; essentially, they are expect them to be flawless. Anything less is unsatisfactory, and the performer has not lived up to the standards set out for them. Unfortunately, since the standards were virtually unattainable, the performing student is all but doomed to fail from the start. This sort of inevitable failure can have serious consequences for the developing student, both psychologically and physically.

Psychological Injury

Perhaps the greatest damage done by the myth of perfection is the inferiority complex it can produce in students. When students cannot perform a piece at the desired level, there may be many proposed causes, many of which could be both damaging and untrue. The most caustic of these reasons are that they lack the talent required to master the piece, or they have not spent enough time preparing. A variety of factors are ignored in this instance: the amount of time spent with the piece, the current level of the student, the competency of teachers, the effectiveness of private practice time; the list goes on and on. Despite this, the stigma of ‘failure’ in relation to unrealistic standards lives on within music education. The same is true in the study of obesity and the social stigma surrounding it; research on the subject can help to shed light on our own biases (Rothblum, 1994).

Feminist scholars have studied the impact of obesity on women’s lives; their findings are highly applicable to the inferiority complex of the music student. Societal stigma surrounding obesity assumes that weight is entirely under the control of individuals, and those who are overweight eat too much and exercise too little. Society deems obese women less competent, capable, and hard working than their thin peers, regardless of the facts presented to them. Conversely, thin women are considered more kind, sensitive, interesting, strong, modest, socially skilled, and exciting than obese women (Rothblum, 1994).

Similar stereotypes are applied to music students; when performers are not playing at the level that is deemed acceptable, they are often perceived to be at fault. It is thought that they have not practiced enough or effectively, or that they lack natural musical ability. The music students may adopt this sort of perfectionism, as they are frequently evaluating the performances of others alongside their own. Though perfection is often unattainable, the standards of musical performance at the professional level in Western art music are still very high (Lehrer, 1987). To some extent, students cannot be blamed for being perfectionists, because otherwise they have little chance of making a professional career out of music, should this be their goal. As Paul Lehrer (1987) notes:

Although neurotic perfectionist tendencies can exaggerate the problem, there is some basis for the perceived need for perfection. At the very least, all notes should be played in a perfectly correct sequence. Anything less will be universally judged as a fault in the performance. Also, the stakes are high in many performances, and the probability of success in a career as a performer certainly is low. Only a small percentage of conservatory graduates will ever be able to earn a living as performers. In such a buyers’ market for talent, performers can lose a steady job or a chance for a concert tour because of a single bungled performance (p. 147).

But if students learn in this culture of fear, they may be doomed to failure. A minority of musicians make careers as performers, but this does not legitimize bringing such standards into the classroom. The objective of music education cannot be exclusively to produce world-class performers—if it were, both the music educator and student would consistently fail. Even if the teacher presents a nurturing environment for the learning process, recordings act as an unspoken standard, and presenting them as desirable inadvertently presents them as attainable. Without direct action, the presentation of recordings can lead to psychological injury, which may lead to crippling performance injuries.
Physical Injury

When the classroom environment treats mistakes as failures, students can be negatively motivated to work beyond the limitations set by the body. The same is true of young women exposed to media images of extremely thin women—they resort to various eating disorder behaviors in order to try and live up to the standards put before them.

In young women, patterns of bulimia and anorexia can emerge and worsen with exposure to media images (Thompson & Heinberg, 1997). These women are led to believe that they can conform to these images with “hard work,” and attempt to do so regardless of the realistic weight that their individual body can achieve in a healthy way. As already mentioned, the increased pressure of our society for women to be thin, combined with a barrage of media images, have led to an increase in anorexic behaviors in young women (Gardner & Garfinkel, 1980). These behaviors lead to serious health concerns, but the women partaking in such behaviors feel compelled to do so in order to meet the unrealistic standards of contemporary Western culture.

Music performance students can react to the demands of playing in high-stress situations in a similar way. Because they may fear not being good enough performers, students may ignore the limitations of their body through long practice sessions, until they seriously injure themselves. This is compounded by the “play through the pain” mentality that often exists in musical environments (Bruser, 1997). Because many musicians do not see music performance as an athletic activity, the pain associated with performance injuries is considered insignificant. Sometimes, the players themselves can ignore their own pain, thinking that it is unimportant.

Madeline Bruser (1997) recounts the story of pianist Leon Fleisher, whose career was cut short when he lost function in one of his hands. There was something macho about practicing through the pain barrier. Even when my hand was exhausted, I kept going. Although I thought I was building up muscle, I was, in fact, unravelling it. (p. 16)

Being unable to perform because of physical limitations cycles back to psychological damage, and a vicious cycle occurs. Moreover, students who feel motivated to improve tend to hide their pain symptoms as long as possible in order to continue playing (Fry, 1987). Teaching students of all levels and ages healthy and efficient practice strategies, including stretching, taking breaks, paying attention to proper technique, and stopping at any sign of pain is essential in preventing long-term physical damage.

What Can Be Done?

If educators are to change the ways they present performances to students, what alternatives should they consider? Perhaps the best way to expose students to realistic standards for music performance is to have them listen to and attend live performances. Live performances give students the opportunity to hear the true capabilities of a real performer, without the alterations associated with recordings. This can also allow students to interact with high-calibre performers. Speaking with performing artists about their work can help students to understand what is involved in the execution of exceptional performances, along with a realistic view on the amount of work, sacrifice, and potential problems associated with this career choice. It can be of particular interest to ask professional performers about issues of stage fright, performance injuries, and other concerns about which they can provide particularly valuable insight.

Alternatively, recordings and videos of live performances can give students a better idea of what professional musicians sound like. While recordings of live music lack the personal aspect of a live performance, they can give a more realistic view of the limits of live performance. That being said, the definition of what constitutes a live performance is constantly evolving, and students should be informed that even recordings labeled as “live” may still be edited in some way.

If possible, music students should be able to hear other students perform frequently, both at similar and higher ability levels. While professionals can give good examples of great artistry, they are already a “finished product”—they are not working out technical and musical issues in the ways similar to students. Exposing students to performances by others at their own level can give them a way to listen actively within the context of their own ability level. By exposing students to peer players of a higher level,
educators can demonstrate what is possible within the context of their own work. Providing goals for performance is essential, but caution must be exercised in the way that they are presented.

Of course, live performances are not always an option because of factors like cost, location, and availability. Also, there are valuable things to be gained from listening to studio recordings; the fact that they could be doctored in some way does not make them worthless. Students can be given various recordings of the same piece, and asked to evaluate the artistic differences that will inevitably exist. By evaluating recordings in this way, students are able to develop their ear from a musical perspective, and to make artistic judgments of their own.

Recordings can also be presented as a way to explain the recording process and to bring the various alterations used to improve them to the students’ attention. If students are taught about the ways in which recordings can be altered, they develop a critical ear, critical thinking skills within a musical context, and they can see the often unrealistic standards presented by these recordings.

There are also several factors to consider when presenting performance models for students. There may be differences, for example, between listening to instrumental performances and vocal performances. It may be beneficial to show musical examples on both the students’ own instrument and other instruments (or voice). This puts value on musical interpretation alongside technical considerations, because aspects such as phrasing and musicality can be evaluated independently of the technical considerations of a particular instrument. Moreover, students may feel different pressures associated with solo, chamber, and ensemble playing. A variety of models may assist in easing student anxiety surrounding the various musical projects students are involved in.

The age of students is also an important consideration. The pressures involved in performance change with the age of the student and thus their reaction to those pressures differ. Research suggests that susceptibility to peer pressure peaks at age fourteen and decreases over time, lessening the likelihood that students will succumb to it after the age of eighteen (Steinberg & Morgan, 2007). Moreover, males are much more likely than females to leave musical activities due to social pressures (Green, 1997). In terms of musical learning, this would suggest that older students are less likely to stop playing due to pressure, and that females are more likely to persevere than males. It is difficult to tell, however, if these students continue despite feeling performance anxiety and inferiority or because they do not feel these pressures acutely. If students feel they are both under social pressure to stop musical activities and that they are not successful when compared to performance models, it is likely that they will quit. Perhaps showing realistic performance models and discussing the processes of recording earlier in musical training could help alleviate anxiety and keep more students involved in music.

While the pressures on elementary and secondary school students are primarily social in origin, post-secondary students in music face the pressure of meeting the incredibly high standards of contemporary Western art music. Students in conservatories, colleges, and universities are somewhat justified in their anxiety when their playing is compared to recordings, because they must compete with the professionals on those recordings, who often have more experience and connections, in a saturated and competitive job market (Lehrer, 1987). Perhaps this sort of pressure is unavoidable in the training of professional musicians, but care must still be taken to avoid putting pressure on students that is beyond their human capacity.

Recorded music has much to offer the music educator, but the consequences of teaching strategies need to be considered. In order to have motivated, happy students who continue to partake in music making, teachers must set realistic standards for their progress. If they manage to do so, the results, in terms of student satisfaction and learning, could be monumental.

References


