

My Journey as a Student and Musician with High-Functioning Autism

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Introduction

Following a brief surveillance of research literature, I learned of the abundance of academic references discussing Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and musical education in childhood and adolescence versus the paucity of materials referring directly to ASD and musical or general education in young adulthood (especially related to higher levels of functioning). Therefore, I have decided to shape my research as a synthesis of my own lived experience as a musician and adult learner of twice exceptionality (ASD and giftedness) and juxtapose it with findings from academic literature.

The main objective of this document is to increase awareness of the needs of the many people belonging to this unique cohort in musical, educational and daily life contexts through shattering some common prejudices regarding their personal, interpersonal and professional capacities. I will also focus on pinpointing common mistakes that educators make with them and present examples of successful strategies that may prove efficacious when working with musicians coping with High Functioning Autism.

Background

When I started my professional training as a pianist, I was very often described by professionals as possessing a keen musicianship and a natural facility to play the piano. However, I was also criticized for perceived emotional or expressive handicaps as well as restrictions in terms of my ability to produce a wide range of dynamics and colors from the piano, which put my artistic development in jeopardy. The older I grew, the more I realized that the musical and academic world was still prone to bias, misconceptions and inconsistency. As Allen, Heaton and Hill (2009) claim:

"Adults with high-functioning forms of ASD were able to report on their emotional processes, but they had significantly higher scores than the matched control group on standardized tests of alexithymia. The authors interpreted this as showing that their ASD sample experienced emotional arousal and were conscious of such arousal, but had difficulties, relative to controls, in verbalizing their emotional experiences and in analyzing their own emotional states and reactions (p. 31)."

Yet, as a stark contrast, they also state: "Individuals with ASD can respond profoundly to music, and show considerable understanding both of the music and its effects on them" (Allen, Heaton & Hill, 2009, p. 36). I believe that these statements are only partly true because, as matter of fact, many young adults with HFA can describe their emotions or monitor their emotional stimuli, yet are prone at times to misreading or misinterpreting them. Moreover, due to their

unique ways of experiencing and expressing emotions, it may take a while to fully process and verbalize their feelings on certain occasions. Hence, and also taking into account the prevalent ability of many individuals on the spectrum to think in visual and associative cues, one approach I might suggest when working with a young musician with ASD in musical-pedagogical settings would be to ask him questions of the following type:

- Are you familiar with a play or a motion picture that is reminiscent of the character of the piece?
- What association or visual cues does the piece ignite in your mind?
- Suppose you had entered into such a scene or situation, how would you react to it with sounds?

This kind of inquiry is essential for the pupil to share his or her views about an assigned piece of music, and in tandem, it can help the teacher have a clearer and fuller view of the pupil's internal world of imageries.

One more prejudice I would like to shatter, based upon my personal experience, is the idea that musicians coping with HFA are naturally lacking cognitive flexibility, and therefore they are perceived as weak and insecure people preferring to cling to technical or artistic concepts that can be seen as "idiosyncratic", "awkward", or even "irritating". As matter of fact, I would say the exact opposite is true, since individuals with HFA possess distinctively different cognitive, emotional and behavioural mechanisms. Given that, musical pedagogues should (as a starting point) always see to it that they *themselves* learn the way their individual students are hardwired before designing methods for the delivery of new skills.

Composer, pianist and educator Dr. Martin Kutnowski is a prominent figure whose ideas I find congruent to mine, expressing the open-minded approach that pedagogues should adopt when working with twice-exceptional learners. He states:

...techniques and tools will translate into excellent teaching and learning if and only if the teacher can adapt to the student's needs. For no pedagogical method can be comprehensive enough to generalize every hand, every voice, every life-long learning journey. That is why I believe that no single teaching tool, school of instrumental technique, or analytical orientation is inherently important; what truly matters is that the teacher assesses the mental map of the student (where he or she is at that moment), defines the learning challenge (the sweet spot), and provides the tools for deep practice until the next meeting (Kutnowski, 2012, p. 33).

This statement is shared here to emphasize the idea that when teaching a budding musician with HFA, especially in advanced stages of individual learning, it is recommended to pair him or her with a teacher that is a masterful craftsman both in sonorous as well as verbal demonstrations, equipped with high levels of flexibility, alertness, patience, humor and an acute sensitivity to the pupil's needs and manner of reasoning. In addition, Kutnowski's

statement emphasizes that a truly masterful and engaging teacher is supposed to be acquainted with a large variety of teaching methods, and possess the capacity for adapting them according to the different *modus operandi* of each exceptional pupil and the piece he or she is about to tackle.

I would also like to highlight that the ideas aforementioned are some of the essential building blocks that shape my research and contribute to my personal growth as a musician and thinker of twice-exceptionality. The more experience and knowledge I gain, the more convinced I am that my way of reasoning and coping with challenges related to musical as well as quotidian aspects of life both stem from an indirect, often eclectic style of learning resulting in a synthesis of intuition, awareness and thinking beyond words.

In that respect, I would like to share that for many years, I have often been criticized (at times harshly and unjustly) by music instructors as showing a tendency to rush at all costs, and because of that I would never be truly esteemed as a performing artist, rather than giving me the working tools required for addressing that challenge as would be expected of merited musical pedagogues. In fact, my response to these detrimental statements has been a mixed blessing. I have dealt with a growing awareness of the lack of constructive criticism that led to a sense of helplessness; however, only recently I have found a way of addressing this challenge through a synthesis of source readings and personal reflection following my practice sessions.

More specifically, I discovered that my tendency to rush through pieces was mainly due to a fear of developing inaccuracies when playing transitional sections within complex passages. I found a statement made by piano pedagogue Richard Chronister claiming: "... The student who has developed the habit of paying attention to finger numbers and knows that finger numbers mean *change* has a much better chance of avoiding traps like this" (Chronister, 2005, p. 212). In order to complete the picture, I juxtaposed this thought with a statement made by piano pedagogue Dr. Krissy Keech (2020), claiming: "Mistakes are also fascinating as they are inevitable and integral to the learning and creative processes". Incorporating those ideas into my practice sessions, I found that I am able to detect the sources of rushing or inaccuracy (e.g. developing awareness of the observation of articulations, rhythmic accuracy and clarity of phrasing) and improvise exercises meant to address those re-emerging challenges.

By conveying these learnings to aspiring musical performers and pedagogues, the point I wish to elucidate and summarize is that generally speaking, and particularly regarding the aspect of musical-technical and cognitive capabilities, musicians with High Functioning Autism are not lacking flexibility, but are rather endowed with cognitive *hyper-flexibility* that can betray them at times and cause them anxiety. Therefore, when working with them in one-on-one educational frameworks, it is essential to address their imagination and spontaneity, and incorporate an improvisational element to teaching for the sake of addressing their challenges with simplicity of concepts, clarity of goals and harnessing intrinsic strengths. Encouraging this approach may contribute to increased efficiency among students with HFA within both musical and quotidian contexts.

Musical educators may ask, "What kind of fixed method should be used in order to assure success when teaching musicians with High-Functioning Autism?" I would respond on a general level by saying that in order to *increase the chances of teaching twice-exceptional people successfully*, one should avoid following an inflexible approach where 'one size fits all, at all costs'; and instead, collect and adapt relevant material out of many methods. In tandem, encourage pupils to improvise their own ways of addressing their own challenges. This kind of work should be accomplished according to the unique learning style of every individual of twice-exceptionality.

One of the most illustrious figures who encouraged this idea was American pianist and pedagogue Carl Roeder, who claimed: "I have formulated a method of my own, based on the principles which form a dependable foundation to build the future structure upon. Each pupil at the outset is furnished with a blank book, in which are written the exercises thus developed as adapted to individual requirements" (Roeder, 1915, p. 63). He preceded this thought by stating: "The progressive teacher's method must be one of accretion", later elaborating that "he gains ideas from many methods and sources, and these he assimilates and makes practical for his work..." (p. 61). In my particular case, those maxims are beneficial teaching practices to employ when working with twice-exceptional budding musicians in one-on-one teaching settings, for they address an eclectic and spontaneous style of learning by providing the correct balance between set framework, clarity of thought, creativity, improvisation and spontaneity. Furthermore, they encourage following this example and creating self-made exercises for personal use when applicable.

When it comes to the craft of interpretation and finding the correct attitude for a piece of music, this task is at least as complex and fragile as teaching individuals of twice-exceptionality the skills of instrumental technique. Due to their unique sensory and cognitive mechanisms, musicians with HFA may see, hear and feel music differently, and naturally, may interpret a piece of music somewhat uniquely in terms of employing gestures at an instrument for shaping phrases and producing a varied tone. Therefore, instead of belittling them, disqualifying their ideas as "mere student playing" or imposing one's interpretative approach, a successful teacher should use verbal and instrumental skills to form a bridge between the pupil's ideas and the teacher's ideas, since their work is akin to conducting collaborative research. From the pedagogical aspect, I form my approach according to an insightful statement made by Carl Roeder, claiming that truly successful pedagogy is:

"... not to say to the pupil, you must play this piece a certain way; but rather say, I see or feel it this way, and give reasons underlying the conception. I believe the successful teacher should be a pianist. He should understand every point and be able to do the thing, else how can he really show the manner of the doing? Many of the nuances, subtleties of color and phrase, effects of charm or of bravura, cannot be explained; they must be illustrated. And furthermore, only he who has been over the road can be a safe or sympathetic guide (Roeder, 1915, p. 68)."

The idea shared here is a vivid example of a multi-purpose, multi-sensory approach integrating sound, sight, reasoning and writing rather than falling too much into an aimless "over mimicry". To summarize, effective teaching and learning is a balanced combination of "doing" and "reasoning".

Perceiving the teaching of twice-exceptional individuals in the musical context as collaborative research also has social and inter-personal benefits. The more a twice-exceptional learner and a teacher become acquainted with each other and build a positive rapport, the better the chances are for both of them to succeed substantially. In other words, when it comes to teaching musicians with HFA, being in contact with a teacher who is open-minded, sensitive, and alert is essential for meaningful progress. The importance of this can be inferred from the statement made by scholars Chang, Chung-Do, Goebert and Hamagani (2015), claiming: "Teacher involvement is critical to students' sense of school connectedness, which emphasizes the importance of the roles of teachers" (p. 185). On a general note, teacher characteristics such as accessibility, availability, open-mindedness and relatedness are vital for students with HFA when they engage in both curricular and extra-curricular activities, especially when they experience phases of recurring behavioural, emotional and cognitive challenges.

Among the figures whose attitude is a valuable reference for me is Mr. Adi Rosenkranz, an Israeli pianist and educator with whom I have been acquainted for many years, and with whom I maintain a friendship that is not confined only to the limits of the classroom. Rather, every teaching session with him, apart from being a social encounter, is an experience by which we *discuss* a piece of music being played, *examine* its components, *interchange* pianistic and interpretative ideas, and function as a *team when addressing the challenges the piece is posing*. This working process is conducted in a respectful and collegial manner, refraining from harsh criticisms. Canadian musical and pedagogical scholar Ruth Wright refers to the aspect of mutual learning by claiming the following: "Informal learning provides opportunities for the disruption of previously rationalized musical knowledge, allowing the equal/unequal relationship balance between teacher and student to be rebalanced and permitting students to create new discourse" (Wright, 2014, p. 13).

In conclusion, I believe that it is necessary for musical pedagogues to be aware of the importance of individual, experience-based, interactive, mutual and assisted learning for musicians with HFA, since successful pedagogy rises and falls upon the notion of *compatibility*. In this context, compatibility is a sense that both participants (i.e., teacher and pupil) share equal responsibility and are willing to acknowledge that exceptional learning is a process in which delivering information is perceived as a bilateral act.

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