The influence of trauma on musicians

by

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to shed light on the influence of trauma on aspects of musicians’ music-making, particularly but not exclusively limited to its effects on emotional expression and memory during music performance and study. Effects on performers and teachers were considered, explicated and discussed in the light of the rapidly expanding body of knowledge about factors involved in psychological sequelae following exposure to traumatic event(s).

Examples are given of how trauma has affected famous musicians and composers. Questionnaires sent to healthcare professionals and music teachers and four case study investigations illuminated specific signs of trauma. Findings underlined that, while responses to trauma are always of a very individual nature, these often particularly affected emotional expression and altered the perceived experience of emotions. Dissociative symptoms were found to affect memory and concentration. Trauma sequelae caused interference, drained energy levels, affected motivation, interpersonal relationships and self-esteem but also led to growth and trauma-catalyzed transformation. Anxiety and tension-related problems had pronounced effects on music performance and high levels of ‘stage fright’ were reported by previously traumatized participants. Trauma was shown to influence the career paths and decisions of musicians.

As gleaned from the literature and research surveys, the following therapeutic approaches appear to be effective: Psychotherapy, trauma counselling, Cognitive-Behavioural therapy, hypnotherapy, EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing), EMI (Eye Movement Integration), pharmacological treatment, natural supplements, body therapies such as SE (Somatic Experiencing) and complementary techniques such as acupressure. Sound and music were identified by respondents and participants as playing an extremely beneficial role in the healing process. The possible benefits of incorporating alternative healing modalities are discussed, but it is made clear that this should only be used in conjunction with scientifically proven and thoroughly researched psychotherapeutic intervention strategies.

This study’s results, appropriately disseminated, are intended to increase awareness and knowledge in performers and teachers, and enable particularly teachers to refer students to appropriate healthcare services in ways not risking further traumatization. Findings can assist healthcare
professionals to better understand particular manifestations of trauma responses in musicians and enable them to intervene in more effective ways.

**List of Keywords:**
Dissociation, emotion, healing therapies, healthcare professionals, holistic paradigm, memory, musicians, music teachers, psychotherapy, trauma.
DEDICATION

To fellow musicians…

Too very often do circumstances challenge us to the utmost, or even prevent us from reaching our full potential. In most cases this can be avoided. It is my hope that this mini-thesis will contribute towards helping performers and teachers understand trauma better and inspire researchers to tirelessly search for solutions.
I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the following people for assistance during the theoretical as well as practical components of this research:

The promoter for this study, Prof Caroline van Niekerk, for her expertise and invaluable assistance throughout the course of this study. Her intellectual support, editorial suggestions, efficiency and the timely manner in which feedback was given are highly regarded. It was a great privilege to work under her professional and knowledgeable guidance.

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I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Polish friends who bravely shared accounts of wartime experiences as well as experiences whilst Poland was under communist rule – their own as well as those of previous generations. This was but one motivating factor behind this research and, like countless other accounts of traumatic experiences, far surpasses thresholds of pain and endurance and is testimony of human courage and resilience.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ii
Dedication iv
Acknowledgements v
List of figures xiii

CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND

1.1 Motivation for the study 1
1.2 Theoretical framework 3
1.3 Hypotheses 4
1.4 Research questions 4
1.5 Aims of the study 5
1.6 Research method 5
1.7 Delimitation of the study 6
1.8 Value of the study 7
1.9 Discussion of contents 7
1.10 Literature overview 8
1.11 Notes to the reader 9

CHAPTER 2: EMOTION AND MEMORY

2.1 Introduction to the relationship between emotion and memory 13
2.2 Defining emotion 14
2.3 Biological basis of emotions 16
2.4 Emotion and motivation 18
2.5 Expression and perception of emotion in music performance and appreciation 20
   2.5.1 Expression of emotion in music performance 20
   2.5.2 Perception of emotion in music appreciation 24
2.6 Defining memory 26
2.7 Types of memory 27
2.8 Emotion, memory and trauma 30
   2.8.1 Processing of emotion during traumatic situations 30
   2.8.2 Traumatic memories 33
   2.8.3 Biological basis of traumatic memories 34
CHAPTER 3: TRAUMA

3.1 Defining trauma
3.2 Types and dynamics of trauma
3.3 Acute Stress Disorder
3.4 Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
3.5 Vulnerability to PTSD
3.6 Effects of trauma
3.7 Dissociation
3.8 Treatment of trauma symptoms
   3.8.1 Pharmacological intervention
   3.8.2 Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT)
   3.8.3 Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) and Eye Movement Integration (EMI)
   3.8.4 Hypnosis
   3.8.5 Body therapies and the role of movement
   3.8.6 Logotherapy
3.9 Alternative viewpoints regarding treatment of trauma
   3.9.1 Chinese medicine
   3.9.2 Ayurveda
   3.9.3 Homeopathy
   3.9.4 Energy medicine or vibrational medicine
   3.9.5 The EPFX/SCIO as vibrational medicine intervention device

CHAPTER 4: TRAUMA AND MUSIC

4.1 Psychological aspects of music performance
   4.1.1 Mental focus, integration and musical identity
   4.1.2 Factors influencing level of performance
   4.1.3 Concentration and memory breakdown
   4.1.4 Uniqueness of each human brain
4.2 The effects of trauma on musicians
4.2.1 Attributing negative symptoms to trauma
4.2.2 Symptoms involving the emotions
4.2.3 Re-enactment, area of perceived threat and internal perception of time
4.2.4 Symptoms involving memory and concentration

4.3 The influence of past trauma on famous musicians
   4.3.1 Physical and occupational disabilities, extra-ordinary lives and extra-ordinary tenacity
   4.3.2 Mood disturbances, familial trauma and re-enactment
   4.3.3 Positive outcomes and the prevention of traumas

4.4 The use of music and art in the recovery process after trauma
   4.4.1 The healing role of art as representation and expression of human experience
   4.4.2 Ways in which music and art can facilitate healing
   4.4.3 Music therapy as a means of facilitating the communication process
   4.4.4 Music as coping mechanism, its anxiolytic effects and potential as counter-vortex to the trauma-vortex

4.5 Responsibilities of music teachers regarding witnessing and referring

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 Introduction
5.2 Research design
5.3 Qualitative psychological research
5.4 Methodology
   5.4.1 Background on emotion, memory and trauma
   5.4.2 Questionnaires
   5.4.3 Case studies
   5.4.4 Discussion
5.5 Limitations
5.6 Ethical considerations

CHAPTER 6: OUTCOMES OF THE RESEARCH SURVEY

6.1 Opinions of participant healthcare professionals
   6.1.1 Population of respondents
   6.1.2 Signs and symptoms of trauma affecting musicians
7.2.3 Overview of effects identified in self-reports 171

7.3 Observations emerging from the case study investigations 172
- 7.3.1 Influence particular to musicians: general overview of symptoms 172
- 7.3.2 Effects on emotion including emotional illness 172
- 7.3.3 Effects on memory 173
- 7.3.4 Effects of trauma on interpersonal relationships and on teaching 173
- 7.3.5 Dissociative symptoms 174
- 7.3.6 Treatment 175
- 7.3.7 Professional career path, spirituality and growth 176

7.4 General observations applicable to the research survey and case studies 176
- 7.4.1 Unconscious processing of music, witnessing and projection 176
- 7.4.2 Audible effects 178
- 7.4.3 The place of movement therapies and alternative or complementary medicine 179
- 7.4.4 Music’s healing role 179

7.5 Comparison of research findings to literature on trauma 180
- 7.5.1 Effects of trauma and their extent 180
- 7.5.2 Effects of trauma experienced early in life 181
- 7.5.3 Concerns particular to survivors of sexual abuse and incest 182
- 7.5.4 The eyes as a means of non-verbal communication 183
- 7.5.5 Dissociation 183
- 7.5.6 Medication 184
- 7.5.7 Challenge of ascertaining accurate diagnoses 185
- 7.5.8 Functioning in the present moment 186
- 7.5.9 Importance of co-operation between the teaching and healthcare professions 186

**CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

8.1 Answering the research questions 188
8.2 Proving or disproving the hypotheses 190
8.3 Conclusions 192
- 8.3.1 Identification of signs of trauma and communication between musicians and professionals 192
- 8.3.2 Definition of trauma found to be applicable to musicians 193
- 8.3.3 Incorporating music, sound and movement in the healing process 193
8.3.4 From the universality to the uniqueness of traumatic experience: creating meaning

8.3.5 Awareness as prerequisite for appropriate referrals leading to effective treatment

8.4 Recommendations for further study

8.4.1 Collaboration between different disciplines

8.4.2 Effects of trauma on musicians at different levels of accomplishment

8.4.3 Personal experiences of trauma by healthcare professionals affecting their views

8.4.4 Gender differences

8.4.5 Effects of trauma on musicians’ cognitive functioning, memory and concentration

8.4.6 Biological considerations

8.4.7 Rate of recovery

8.4.8 Aspects related to music’s role in healing and the place of vibrational medicine

8.4.9 Providing good support structures for students in schools and lessening the risk of secondary traumatization to professionals

8.5 Recommendations regarding areas that should be implemented in the training of music educators

8.5.1 Implementing training in psychology in the music teaching curriculum

8.5.2 Benefits of incorporating movement as part of music training

8.5.3 Reaching teachers in rural areas

8.6 Epilogue

Appendix A: Questionnaire to Healthcare Professionals

Appendix B: Questionnaire to Music Teachers

Appendix C: Case Study Interviews

List of References
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Musicig: Four dimensions (Elliott 1995:40)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Different aspects of the chain of musical communication of emotion (Juslin 2005:87)</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>Defensive responses to fear that have been conserved through evolution (Kandel 2006:339)</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>Model for positive and negative manifestation of performance arousal (Gorrie 2009b:208)</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>The Dissociative Spectrum as assimilated by Hartman (2009) from the work of Peichl (2007a:162), Nijenhuis et al. (2004) and Watkins &amp; Watkins (1997:32)</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6</td>
<td>Five areas of Cognitive-Behavioural assessment (Royal College of Psychiatrists 2007)</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>