

“The more the merrier”? Understanding the wellbeing of professional musicians in collaborative and solo work settings

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Recognizing the need to include professional musicians in mainstream wellbeing profiling, and to move beyond a focus on the potentially debilitating factors of the music profession, this study aimed to understand how professional musicians experience wellbeing in the light of positive psychology. In particular, acknowledging the role of inter-personal relationships in wellbeing, the goal was to explore wellbeing profiles in relation to collaborative and solo-oriented working contexts. Participants included six professional musicians, three belonging to fixed-group work settings (orchestra, choir, and chamber ensemble) and three engaged in a solo-oriented musical route (soloist, composer, and conductor). Two in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant, separated by a two-week period of individual record-keeping using the Day Reconstruction Method. Results revealed identity as an overarching sustainer of wellbeing. Relationships and “musical moments” emerged as key elements in the construction of wellbeing, while the transition to the professional phase was often challenging. Group identity appeared as a vehicle for wellbeing among the collaborative musicians, although this type of activity also placed demands on social skills. Solo musicians highlighted freedom of expression as a source of purpose although a lack of feedback represented a challenge. Implications are discussed in relation to the role of holistic training in educational settings.

Keywords: wellbeing; positive psychology; professional musicians; flourishing; qualitative methodology

Psychological research has for many years tended to focus on alleviating symptoms. Recent studies have re-defined how being psychologically well means more than just the absence of disorder (Seligman 2008). At the fore-

front of *Positive Psychology* has been the attempt to study what we can do to help individuals not just get by, but to flourish and live to their fullest potential. Shifting from an initial focus on happiness and positive emotions, a multidimensional construct of wellbeing is now emerging, bringing to light the importance of components such as meaning, purpose, engagement, relationships, and mastery. Professional musicians, however, are yet to be included in mainstream wellbeing profiling, and there is a need to move beyond a focus on the potentially debilitating factors of the music profession.

Making music has been identified as a wellbeing enhancer in many contexts: everyday use (e.g. Västfjäll *et al.* 2012), community (e.g. Perkins and Williamon *in press*), clinical settings (e.g. Pothoulaki *et al.* 2012), and education (e.g. Boyce-Tillman 2000). Music has also been clearly associated with flow experiences—moments of optimal state through energized focus (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), both in professional and education settings. However, continuous music activity at a professional level has been considered a threat to holistic wellbeing through different mediators: e.g. physical injuries (Fishbein *et al.* 1998), stress and mental fatigue (e.g. Steptoe 1989), boredom (e.g. Parasuraman and Yasmin 2000), and Music Performance Anxiety (e.g. Kenny and Osborne 2006). Following the need to address musicians' psychological experience of wellbeing through a positive lens and honoring the construct's holistic nature, the aim of this study is to understand what it means to live "psychologically well" as a professional musician, having as a framework the PERMA model of Flourishing (Seligman 2011). In the context of this model, wellbeing is defined as a multidimensional construct including Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. Specifically, acknowledging the high prominence for overall wellbeing that positive relationships have proven to represent (Reis and Gable 2003), this study explores wellbeing profiles in relation to collaborative and solo-oriented working contexts in music.

METHOD

Participants

Participants included six professional musicians (age=32-52 years) from four countries, working either in fixed-group settings (orchestra, chorus, or chamber group) or with an individually-oriented professional context (soloist, composer, or conductor). Acknowledging the fluid nature of his activity, the conductor was placed in the solo-oriented group for having an essentially individual preparation routine and not belonging to a fixed group of work. Three participants were male and three were female. Years of professional

experience ranged from three to thirty-two. All participants were working full-time as musicians, with a highly acclaimed level of performance in their field of musical expertise.

Materials

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and the Day Reconstruction Method (DRM) (Kahneman *et al.* 2004). In the form of a structured self-administered questionnaire, the DRM is designed to reduce recall biases and assess how people spend their time and how they experience the various activities and settings of their lives.

Procedure

Two interviews were conducted with each participant: a non-structured interview at the beginning of the study and a semi-structured interview at the end, built upon the five components of the PERMA model of Wellbeing. In-between the interviews, the participants engaged in daily record keeping through the DRM over a period of two weeks. The project was approved by the CUK Research Ethics Committee and subject to informed consent from all participants. Data were fully transcribed and analyzed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

RESULTS

All musicians reported high overall wellbeing and satisfaction linked with their professional musical activity. Emergent themes highlighted general as well as activity-specific enhancers and challenges for wellbeing.

Identity

Identity emerged as a central, overarching sustainer of wellbeing. Knowing oneself well, learning to accept limits, and filtering negative inputs were consistently regarded as fundamental. A tension between music as being and music as doing was recurrent in all accounts. Making music was for all participants an intrinsic need, a definer of the self, and a strong source of meaning: “there is just not a way I could work on something else because this is who I am in my essence” (composer). At the same time, the structure of music as a professional business activity brought specific challenges. Collaborative-setting musicians placed an emphasis on monotony from routine and repetition: “I miss music in the midst of the mechanic production of music. Sometimes, at rehearsal break, I run hysterically to my dressing room to just do

music” (choral musician). Increasing the variety of repertoire and participating in solo moments or smaller groups emerged as significant strategies for enhanced engagement. Solo-setting participants stressed self-expression, freedom, and autonomy as vehicles for wellbeing. A challenge emphasized recurrently concerned the politics, power roles, and conflicts of interests in the music business, which were seen as responsible for the suppression of the centrality of music and truth. A tension was felt between being artistically true to oneself and, as the soloist put forward, “being an emotional machine, just pleasing powers by playing the game.” In relation to this, there emerged the recurrent view that being successful in the music world is not dependent primarily on musical quality. Concurrently, a structuring theme for the global accounts of wellbeing in this group was the need to create a self-concept and belief of self-worth that is independent from musical characteristics and achievements.

Transition to professional phase

The transition to being a professional emerged as the most challenging stage in terms of wellbeing. Collaborative-setting musicians highlighted integration and group acculturation as major challenges in the first years. The sense of having to prove one’s worth to the group and the pressure of competition emerged as dominant. For solo-setting musicians, the need for self-regulation and the lack of available feedback appeared as the major demands. For both groups, this transition brought more extreme emotional responses. The establishing of a solid professional career at the highest level after this period was mentioned as a strong enabler of perceived accomplishment.

Musical moments

All musicians referred to “musical moments” as a fundamental source of positive emotions and engagement. Concerts as “moments of transcendence” or “peak experiences” were mentioned by all participants and in all accounts the shared nature of the moment was a central feature. The more experienced musicians reported a decrease in the quantity of peak moments with time, but an increase in intensity.

Relationships

Positive relationships in family, social, and work-related contexts appeared as central for wellbeing. For the collaborative group, emphasis was placed on group identity as a source of meaning and on engagement through learning

with colleagues. Convergence in musical ideas and symbolic meaning creating “oneness” in performance recurred as both a highly significant vehicle for wellbeing and a major challenge. All collaborative musicians highlighted the need to develop specific social skills to maximize group wellbeing: flexibility, tolerance, and communication. For solo-oriented musicians, relationships appeared hard to establish and maintain, particularly outside of the music world. Self-sufficiency and the lack of a regulation entity made discipline and self-regulatory practice routines an additional challenge. Consistently highlighted by the composer was the need to force oneself to not be isolated by music and “be connected” through normal routines: “I would tell any beginning composer: make sure you wash the dishes, help change the baby’s diapers and make it to family reunions.”

DISCUSSION

The experience of musicians’ wellbeing seems to be, overall, a positive one. In addition to general satisfaction with life, all participants found positive meaning in work. The specific challenges usually associated with the profession may not be as limiting to wellbeing as could have been thought. *Positive emotions* emerged as highly related to “musical moments.” Variety of repertoire and ensembles appeared as a central source of *engagement*. The shared nature of the musical experience emerged as the core source of *meaning* and an established professional career in music appeared to lead to high perceived *accomplishment*. Additionally, the study highlighted the centrality of *identity* for wellbeing among professional musicians, and reinforced that key processes for positive functioning involve responses to, and regulation by, interpersonal *relationships*.

However, collaborative and solo musicians are presented with different challenges that need to be addressed, particularly at an educational level. The need for regulatory feedback through meaningful relationships that seems to be structural to a solo career, especially in its initial phase, brings to light the crucial role of mentoring as a lifelong education tool. Further, the high emotional instability and demands on social-skills that professionals highlight reinforce the double role presented to music institutions: going beyond refining musical skills and focusing also on resilience and social adaptation in an anticipatory approach to professional life. Innovative educational programs have been emerging in an attempt to maximize this process (e.g. Johnsson and Hager 2008), focusing on forming a sense of identity that goes beyond music skills and accomplishments, enabling, through a “living curriculum,” the development of the whole individual.

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