

Resilience Education

The contribution of musical practice to develop resilience

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Introduction

One skill that has become more and more important in the last decades, is **resilience**. This skill involves being able to survive in the long term by transforming oneself in relationship to one's environments and learning from the 'unexpected'.¹

Since our lives and our planet change and develop all the time, it is important to learn to deal with new situations and to be innovative. It is not always possible to immediately solve our problems, so we have to learn to live with them. Therefore, resilience can be our helping hand.

Let us focus on our current situation, in which COVID-19 plays a big role. We need not only to find a cure and a solution to fix all the damage that has been given to us, but we also need to adapt to our local policy. We need to find new ways to do our job, to be educated, to maintain our social network, et cetera. As music teachers, this means we have to develop new methods for education, such as streaming courses online, make recordings, or uploading theoretical tutorials. What makes it even more complex, is the fact that we have to keep in mind that we are not the only ones that have to be(come) resilient: our pupils have to follow their courses through different ways and have to discover and learn more individually.

There is one step holding us back from a transition to a resilient society, namely the fact that we are still living in a quite conservative society. In my opinion, this is holding us back from using innovative solutions for the problems we are dealing with nowadays. Therefore, I want younger generations to develop more resilience and open-mindedness, so they will be open for innovations and solve our world problems. This also means that (music) education should be accessible for everyone.

In this essay, the contribution of music education to the development of resilience will be discussed through my personal experiences as a musician. The focus will be placed on the contribution of learning an instrument, playing in ensembles and musical improvisation to develop resilience, and what educational methods there are to train skills that can help developing resilience. This essay shall be finalized by a short conclusion.

¹ S. Kagan, V. Kirchberg, *Music and sustainability: organizational cultures towards creative resilience*, 2016.

Chapter 1: Process of learning an instrument

In the process of learning an instrument, student and teacher are faced with resilience in many aspects. In this chapter, I would like to discuss the process of having to deal with failure and success, which is one aspect that is connected to resilience. To learn something, means that you want to acquire knowledge or a skill that you do not have yet. For most people, this automatically results in making mistakes during the process of learning. Therefore, dealing with failure plays a big part in education. The way how we reflect on failure and success, aligns with resilience. This makes music education not different than other forms of education, but where music education differs from others, is in performing as a productive practice.

1.1 Idealistic society

As told before, dealing with failure and success is a normal part of learning. What makes this mentally and socially difficult for us, is the high pressure of our idealistic society. In this society, failure often has major consequences for us. It is not always seen as part of the learning process, but more as a personal mark or attack. Music is a discipline that deals with this a lot.

By learning an instrument, people learn how to develop skills. This process is necessary to become flexible and to train how to develop ourselves. If we are able to do this, we can adapt to almost every situation in life.

As musicians, we are constantly pushing boundaries, by studying challenging repertoire, dealing with organizational situations on and behind the stage, playing in challenging acoustics and locations, trying to excite our public, et cetera. It is necessary to find ways to communicate with our audience. During concerts, a musician needs a lot of patience and flexibility. Anything can happen on stage, both organizationally, and musically.

1.2 Performing

Once you developed basic skills on your instrument, it is time to perform on stage. Nowadays, pupils learn to perform their pieces at an early stage. They learn to prepare their repertoire and to follow a tight schedule, but also learn to deal with unexpected situations that can and will happen during concerts. These experiences are also beneficial for dealing with similar situations outside of the music world.

Examples of possible situations that may appear during concerts, are: planning issues, for example in the attributes (chairs, stands) you asked for, a delay in the schedule, or miscommunication; sheet music issues, a strong wind while playing outside can blow all your sheets away, you placed your sheets in the wrong order, or you made wrong remarks; or unexpected happenings due to the audience, like people that interrupt your playing, people that applaud in between movements, people that (dis)like your concert.

As you can see, there are quite a lot of aspects of performing that can cause stress and tension. These factors can therefore influence our failure or success. If we don't want them to affect our playing, we have to develop a kind of resistance and flexibility. This creative potentiality of music is related to an attitude of dynamic resilience in life.²

² S. Kagan, V. Kirchberg, *Music and sustainability: organizational cultures towards creative resilience*, 2016.

Chapter 2: Ensemble playing

Playing in musical ensembles is a way of developing musical and social skills related to resilience. In this chapter, I will describe what skills there are involved in ensemble playing, and how ensemble playing can be a useful tool for developing skills that you can adapt to other situations in life.

Ensemble playing means that you play one piece together with multiple voices (players). For this, you have to cooperate and communicate to become a unity. In music, this means you have to breathe together, move together, play in the same tempo, with the same timbre, et cetera. From my own experience, I know there is a long way to go to reach this goal, both musically and socially.

2.1 Musical skills developed by ensemble playing

Musically, ensemble playing is a way of interacting through music, that involves responsibility and self-organization. In ensemble music, each player has an individual part that forms the total piece, if you put them together. Therefore, each player is independent and dependent at the same time. As an individual player, it is important to know how to play your part, both musically and technically. You need to count all the notes and rests on your own, especially when you are the only one that plays your part. By analyzing your part and the full score, you already know in which places you need to anticipate and where you have to submit to other players. It is an individual responsibility to play your part correctly and know where to anticipate or not.

The dependency is based on the fact that you play together with other people. The responsibility lies here in reacting correctly to others, following the same tempo, intonation and timbre, to be able to 'melt' together. Furthermore, you have to react to unexpected happenings. Since we do not play with robots, making mistakes is common in ensemble playing. Depending on how 'big' the mistake is, you and the other players have to adapt to it. Changes can occur in intonation; tempo; rhythm; and strike ups. Mistakes can also happen to yourself, when this happens, you have to catch up with the group as soon as possible.

2.2 Social skills developed by ensemble playing

Communication and social skills are also part of ensemble playing. With this, I do not mean communication through music, but the organizational part of ensemble playing. In an ensemble, you need to plan rehearsals and concerts; communicate how to improve passages in the music; and try different kinds of techniques and timbres. Since you are dealing with a group of people, you need to be flexible to let everyone feel comfortable and heard in their needs. This is a skill that requires a lot of time and experience to master it, and can also be a very useful skill in 'normal' life.

There are a lot of skills to develop in becoming a good communicator. Important is to know you are dealing with all different individuals, that behave in different ways and might have other ideas or approaches. Therefore, you need to adapt to every different person and their needs, to let them feel heard. Being open and flexible is the most effective way to approach an individual, because it will let him or her feel comfortable and recognized. While rehearsing, this means that you have to try to be objective and polite when giving feedback to others, or when explaining your ideas to them. If your colleagues approach something differently, try to be open for that approach. You have to know when to defend your ideas and when you have to step back.

Besides being open, I think it is also important to ask everybody's opinion, especially to the more introverts of the group. By actively including all the members of the group, everyone will feel heard and recognized. This is both helpful for group cohesion, and developing musical ideas about the piece you are playing.

As a member of the group, you have a responsibility and contribution to the group cohesion and bond between individual players. You can improve this bond by appointing good qualities of each player, and respectfully appointing passages that someone can improve, as constructive critique. I would prefer formulating a sentence like this: *"Hey, I saw you playing this passage. I think (...) element was already nice, but perhaps it is an idea to try (...) to develop it even more! Do you agree with that?"*, or: *"I learned this practicing technique before and it was really helpful to me. Would you like to try it in your passage as well? Maybe it can help you out."*

In short, the responsibility, organizational, and communicative elements of ensemble playing can help becoming resilient and can be useful in any situation that involves other people.

Chapter 3: Improvisation

One last subject that I would like to discuss, is improvisation. This part of musical practice is perhaps the best training to become resilient. The piece of music that is created through improvisation, is led by 'the unexpected', you could say. It is common to use some basic rules before starting to play, but even without these rules, it is possible to improvise, alone or in an ensemble. The necessary elements that are needed to let improvisation succeed, are flexibility and innovation. There is a balance needed in anticipation and waiting, and a capacity of finding solutions and creating something new. Both can be approached in two different ways: the musical part, and the emotional part of improvisation.

3.1 Musical approach of improvisation

This is the rational part of improvisation, in which you have to musically adapt to the piece that you are creating. While improvising, you have to adapt to the harmony, rhythm, and atmosphere that you are creating, especially while playing with others. You can add other notes or modulate, but this needs to be rationally approached. Furthermore, you have to learn to take initiative and wait while improvising with others. It is like having a spontaneous conversation: you do not know what is going to happen, and therefore you listen and react; you adapt to the 'unexpected'. With this, I mean that anyone can play any note, rhythm, harmony, that may surprise you. Even when this is a "wrong" note, you have to go with them to create something new.

Learning to be flexible also includes controlling your technique. Whether this depends on the instrument or not, I sometimes find some technical difficulties while improvising. When I prepare an existing piece on sheet music, I can write fingerings and bowings on my sheet, repeat those a few times, and memorize the coordination. By this practice, I learn to have control of the technical aspect of the piece. However, while improvising, there is no time to practice the technical part of your music, and you have to make it all up in the moment. Learning how to get control of this, is a major skill in music.

3.2 Emotional approach of improvisation

There is also an emotional aspect of improvisation, namely the affectivity and empathy between players, while improvising together. Like I said before, improvising is like a spontaneous conversation. Therefore, emotions are part of it too, and those can affect the way of playing and conversing. To create the best improvisation, you must feel each other's intentions. You can react on each other's lines and emotions.

Thus, improvisation can be a helpful tool to become resilient. Learning to imagine and experiment can make you innovative. This helps you finding solutions for challenging situations in life, and adapting to new, unexpected happenings.

Conclusion

To conclude, the practice of music can indeed contribute to becoming resilient, through the practice of an instrument, ensemble playing, and improvisation. Music helps developing skills, which is a practice that makes us capable of adapting to almost every situation in life. If we know how to teach ourselves, we can change into anything we need to be.

As musicians, we also train organizational resilience through self-organization, organization in ensemble playing, and logistical organization. This helps us becoming resilient in our individual performance, our planning, and helps us adapting to logistical difficulties. Furthermore, we learn to deal with failure and success due to high performance pressure. We learn how to control ourselves in times of stress and pressure; how to perform in spite of limitations.

We learn how to communicate both musically and socially while performing in ensembles and orchestras. Therefore we create communicational and educational skills. We learn how to approach different opinions, how to defend ours, and how to compromise. We learn how to develop ourselves and others, depending on our communication skills.

Through improvisation, we learn to deal with unexpected and spontaneous happenings. We learn how to communicate by listening and reacting, emotional affectivity and empathy. We learn to take initiative and wait at the right time. And we learn how to control our skills and techniques with a different approach.

I think that musical practice can be very useful to become resilient, because of all the variety in situations that you get to deal with. Including playing with others, which teaches you how to adapt to different opinions, ways of playing or being, how to communicate, and how to be flexible in your planning. To me, resilience is a major skill in life that can be developed perpetually, because being flexible means that you never stop adapting yourself to any situation.