Gabriella Makuc
MUCO 423: Musical and Mystical Experience

The Wounded Musician:
Listening to the Hurt Within

Music is known to touch wounds listeners did not know they had and bring them healing they did not know they needed. Yet within the contemporary classical music scene, a large percentage of musicians suffer or have suffered pain from playing.[1] This paper will explore the spiritual journey of such injury, from causes to interpretations to the transformation it can inspire. This discussion will look outside of Western medicine toward stories and practices that embrace how these performance injuries may be much more than physical wounds.

I. The Problem

The contemporary field of classical music is fueled by competition, achievement and personality. In relating results from her study on injured musicians, Christine Guptill describes the relationship between stress and injury in this career path. Many musicians in her study "mentioned the process of auditioning for musical work…as a difficult process and one in which the risk of injury was perceived to increase."[2] Competing for limited spots in a generally underfunded field can push musicians to injure themselves through misuse and overuse, especially when they are working in isolation.

But this culture of competition points more deeply to the widespread cultural value of individualism. The act of playing music is often bound up in the formation of the

[1] Christine A. Guptill, "The Lived Experience of Professional Musicians with Playing-Related Injuries," *Medical Problems of Performing Artists* 26, v. 2 (2011): 84.
[2] Ibid. 87.

musician's identity.[3] Music is a force by which the musician defines herself and a vehicle through which she expresses herself,[4] a view that is widespread but not without risk. Madeline Bruser's book *The Art of Practicing* takes issue with this approach. She explains, "we get caught up with trying to make the instrument do what we want, and trying to make the music sound as we think it should."[5] This focus on results over process is a vicious circle: "the less pleasure we receive, the more we try to force the instrument to give it to us,"[6] a marriage of mental and physical angst. For Bruser, the purpose of music lies beyond expressing the performer's emotions. When a musician focuses heavily on assuming and emoting the mood of a piece, he limits "the composer's power [to] flow through [his] body."[7] Rather, by cultivating an open self, the musician can become a conduit rather than a commander. Bruser herself struggled with a habit of emotive yet tension-building gestures. When she finally realized that they entailed playing louder than she was listening, and was able to let go of them, her sound flowed freely through to the listener.[8] Bruser is critical of the self-expressive, identity-building trends in music-making, and links them directly to physical tension that causes injury.

Amidst the contemporary focus on self-expression, there is often a deep-seated lack of self-trust. Bruser touched upon this when describing the "vicious circle" of result-oriented practicing; musicians become discouraged when unable to live up to their own vision. In his book *The Musician's Soul*, James Jordan writes in even sterner terms: "most

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[3] Shannon McCready and Denise Reid, "The Experience of Occupational Disruption among Music Students," *Medical Problems of Performing Artists* 4 (2007): 140.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Madeline Bruser, *The Art of Practicing* (New York: Random House, 1997), 12.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid., 16.
[8] Ibid., 64.

musicians…involve themselves in a process of self-mutilation…[but] one must be able to love oneself first before that love can be shared with an ensemble or an audience through the music."[9] Musicians must develop a core of love, a sentiment echoed by Bruser. Here she explains what can occur when musicians neglect their center:

> We are afraid that it we just relax and let ourselves work naturally and comfortably, we won't be good enough. So we drive ourselves, force ourselves, and hurt ourselves. In doing so, we lose touch with our most valuable asset as artists- the willingness to be vulnerable, genuine, and spontaneous, to communicate from the heart.[10]

Entangled in the sense of individualism to which many performers subscribe, there is an innate lack of trust that the self, as it is, is enough. There is a need to *create* the self, to *prove* the self, and not necessarily a basis for *trusting* the self.

Into this place of deep hurt enter the medicinal practices that are supposed to help musicians heal from their injuries. Western medicine often prescribes drugs, surgery, physical therapy or psychotherapy for long-term injuries. But "the responsibility for healing lies with the doctor,"[11] so the role of the patient is to cooperate with the treatment. This approach stems from a worldview in which scientific findings hold authority over intuited experience. In holistic medicinal practices, though, "the patient's willingness to participate fully in his own healing is necessary for success."[12] In such practices that have sustained humanity for millennia, the consciousness of the patient is the main ground on which healing occurs.

From the studies regarding the experiences of student and professional musicians, it is clear that the treatment available to them is inadequate, and many disregard the option altogether. Many students, for example, "are reluctant to refer to themselves as

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[9] James Jordan, *The Musician's Soul* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1999), 10.
[10] Bruser, *The Art*, 19.
[11] Caroline Myss, *Anatomy of the Spirit* (New York: Harmony Books, 1996), 48.
[12] Ibid.

injured, because they do not want to be compelled to rest or change their routine or technique."[13] Many stated that they "would continue to play through pain because of their love of music and their need for constant improvement."[14] And even those who seek treatment may struggle with their injury for life because temporary physical curing does not amount to long-term emotional and psychological healing.[15] Injured musicians often lack guidance for facing the roots of their injury.

II. Framing and Reframing

Throughout history, people have used story to come to a greater understanding of themselves. The truth in story lies not in its factual accuracy but in its resonance with the soul. It is a means of drawing disparate, confusing parts of one's life- such as pain- into relationship with the whole of existence. From suffering martyrs to Jesus Christ, there are various mythic interpretations of pain: figures who embrace it, figures who reject it, and even figures who are not affected by it.[16] This paper will focus on two mythical figures who suffer from prolonged pain and how their stories may relate to wounded musicians.

The medieval European myth *Parsifal*, as retold in Richard Wagner's opera,[17] features a king who loses his creative power due to a wound that will not heal. King Amfortas plunges into meaninglessness as the once life-giving sacrament of the grail loses significance for him and his kingdom falls into infertility. His wound is both physically painful and existentially demanding. It causes him to feel not just separated from his creative energy, but also separated from God. It is an eternal wound that can

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[13] McCready and Reid, "Occupational Disruption," 141.
[14] Ibid.,143.
[15] Myss, *Anatomy*, 47.
[16] Melanie Thernstrom, *The Pain Chronicles* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 62.
[17] Richard Wagner, *Parsifal*, 1882.

only be healed by the arrival of the pure fool, Parsifal, who eventually looks on his suffering with compassion and unites the wound with the spear that caused it.

In describing their wounds, musicians often reference feeling separated from their source of creation or their ability to participate in flow. One participant in Guptill's study states, "you don't get the rush in the same way when you're in the middle of playing and it hurts."[18] The injured performer can feel rejected from the community, experience his instrument as abusive, or wonder why pursue music at all. While body and spirit often blend together in music-making, constant awareness of the body, the clock, and the hurt can cause the musician to question the meaning of the sacrament. By connecting with Amfortas, performers are invited to contemplate the depth of the wounds they feel. While culture often encourages them to keep quiet about their wounds- Guptill references a perceived "culture of silence"[19] –allowing the pure fool within themselves to ask the question as to why they're wounded, to expose the hurt and care for it, is essential. And just as Parsifal must touch the spear to the wound, recognizing and interacting with the source of the wound (rather than running from it) is a path toward understanding.

Another figure for wounded musicians to consider is Carl Jung's archetype of the wounded healer. Musicians often find themselves in this role, healing others through their art though the process of creation is painful. The archetype of the wounded healer is modeled on the mythical figure Chiron, a centaur wounded by Heracles' arrow. Chiron "came to embody the paradox of the great healer who can heal everyone except

[18] Guptill, "Lived Experience," 90.
[19] Ibid.

himself."[20] The wounded healer's suffering helps him connect with others who suffer, giving him the compassion and understanding to sit with them through their pain without offering quick solutions. However, the wound is usually the result of an accident, and "he does not embrace pain voluntarily."[21] He is neither a martyr nor a nihilist; he lives in the mystery of his wound while fulfilling his calling to heal others.

One Jewish tale vividly portrays the wounded healer's attitude toward hurt. When Rabbi Johanan's patients express that "neither [the sufferings] nor their reward" are welcome, they are ready to be healed.[22] Through the course of the story, readers learn of Johanan's wounds: an illness of which another must heal him, and the tragic death of his ten sons. The last person whom he heals is a man suffering from existential sorrow. Before healing him, Johanan spends time in mourning with Rabbi Eleazer. He heals him while acknowledging the profundity of his existential wound.[23] Rabbi Johanan carries with him the grief of loss, the power to bring others the light of healing, and the equanimity to acknowledge his pain but not be controlled by it. For musicians experiencing long-term wounds, Johanan's complex balance between healing and hurt and the grace by which he shares these with others is a profound model.

III. Healing

Holistic healing provides space for the wounded to understand their hurt in a cosmic sense. But it also gives them humble tools through which to enact the healing ritual in their everyday lives. The musician walking a path of healing does not necessarily

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[20] Galia Benziman, Ruth Kannai and Ayesha Ahmad, "The Wounded Healer as Cultural Archetype," *CLC Web: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.1 (2012), 3.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., 4.
[23] Ibid.

wake up each day and live out the epic redemptive finale of Parsifal, but she participates in this energy by fostering habits that are attentive to her soul.

Student and professional musicians throughout the two articles referenced in this paper expressed deep fear of identity loss if they were to lose the ability to perform.[24] Yet grappling with this fear could be the path for them to come to terms with the fleeting nature of earthly existence. Richard Rohr of the Center for Action and Contemplation writes of the purpose of suffering as initiation into the contemplative life: "our wound is the only way…for us to get out of ourselves, and for grace to get in."[25] For musicians to realize that they are not invincible and that their status as performers is not what music is all about, injury is a path to trusting the reality of music's power apart from one's ego.

For the self-reflective injured musician who embraces the compassion of the pure fool or the equanimity of the wounded healer, the musical life becomes greater than her accomplishments. The musical life is everywhere. In his book *The Musical Life*, W.A. Mathieu shares vignettes on the sacred power of sound as it permeates his whole life. He listens to pennies and dishwashers, wine glasses and cities. He listens to the masks people assume when they speak to one another, and he listens to ropes and darkness and light. He encourages readers, "I want to point out the musical sense that is already in [your] life, just waiting for you to notice it, right there where it has been all along."[26]

Bruser advocates a similar kind of deep and loving listening in approaching one's instrument. Like Mathieu, she is intent on understanding the musical life as a dialogue with reality. In one poignant paragraph on release in practicing, she explains:

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[24] McCready and Reid, "Occupational Distuprion," 140.
[25] Richard Rohr, *Initiation,* Daily meditation e-mail, accessed May 23 2016.
[26] W. A. Mathieu, *The Musical Life* (Boston: Shambala Publications, 1994), xii.

> When you sense the futility of your struggle, stop and feel that moment, in between one form of struggle and the next, when you're unsure of what to do next. Let yourself feel it exactly as it is. You may notice that you feel a little disappointed in yourself; you long to feel more connected to the music. Let yourself feel that disappointment and longing. You may notice that you feel anxious not knowing how to reach your goal, not having an answer. Feel that anxiety without rushing to try another strategy. Don't fight what is happening. Be as you are.[27]

For Bruser, the act of noticing things while playing- such as sounds, sensations and feelings- is the artistic process. She encourages musicians to notice the flow of motion between their body and the instrument.[28] She applauds freedom in this relationship: "instead of forcing your body to control your instrument, tune into your sensations, trust your innate coordination and musicality, and let yourself move spontaneously. Let your body make the music. It has a brilliant mind of its own."[29]

Wounds make people vulnerable. Bruser re-imagines the ritual of the classical concert hall as it embraces sharing of vulnerability. She writes, "the grandness of presentation that challenges and frightens us in performance also honors our vulnerability. We dress up in fine clothes to give a concert because we are celebrating the power that emanates from an exposed human heart."[30] In a culture where the injured are often silent and their hurts are patched up rather than healed, a deep and loving look at one's wound can be the beginning of a moving love affair with reality.

Performance injuries cause disruption in musicians' lives, but this disruption need be nothing less than an awakening of consciousness. Musicians' wounds can show them their existential hurt and guide them toward a musical life that is deeper than their desires and achievements. Healing is not an easy answer, but a process of listening.

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[27] Bruser, *The Art*, 161.
[28] Ibid., 203.
[29] Ibid., 207.
[30] Ibid., 240.

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