

## THE PERILS OF PERFECTIONISM

By Dr. Louise Montello

Performance Wellness, Inc.

While visiting friends in San Francisco a couple of months ago, I picked up a copy of *The Chronicle* and found a wonderfully glib and provocative essay by staff writer Jon Carroll entitled, *Is Something Missing?* Reacting to pop psychology tel-evangelists who insist that we have to work harder to fill the void in our lives, Carroll eloquently stated, “Yes, there is something missing in all of our lives. That is the nature of life, that there is something missing from it. *It is not a problem.*” I heartily agree and I humbly offer my view as a music therapist who works primarily with stressed and injured musicians that perfectionism - which can be interpreted as a deep-rooted belief that one is not enough - is a force to be reckoned with in the musical community.

Current research findings indicate that stress in the performing arts is reaching almost epidemic proportions. Seventy-five percent of orchestra musicians surveyed internationally reported having one or more performance-related injuries. One quarter of the musicians experienced performance anxiety as a debilitating *medical* problem. Although there are many underlying causes of performance-related stress and anxiety, after fifteen years of working clinically with professional musicians, and being a performing musician myself, I have found that the most insidious one is the stance of uncompromising perfectionism.

The root of this extreme form of perfectionism seems to come from the vulnerable musician’s need for outside approval and validation of his or her innate worth. When these musicians receive unfavorable feedback associated with a musical activity, they often experience it as a reflection of their inherent “badness” and judge themselves as being deficient. Because many musicians’ self esteem is dependent on how others perceive them, they often lose touch with their own inner reality, or *essential self*, which holds the individual’s unique life purpose, innate gifts, feelings, beliefs, and somatic

states. Instead of trying to connect with their own essential selves, these musicians try to imitate the behavior of others who they deem to be “successful.” Often these vulnerable musicians are unable to accept their own humanity - which is, of course, prone to error, fatigue, fear, and other less than ideal self-states.

Don't get me wrong, perfectionism isn't all bad. It fuels the creative fire that allows us to maximize our potential and give the very best that we can give. It is only when perfectionism becomes polarized and we reject the vulnerable, intensely human aspects of the self that problems arise. “Polarized Perfectionists” are those individuals who seem to be wedded to left hemispheric brain activity: they are product vs. process-oriented in their approach to learning and performing music; they rely primarily on external, as opposed to self-generated feedback; they focus a lot on detail, as opposed to seeing the “big” picture when preparing performance pieces; and they tend to forget about their bodies when they practice/play, ignoring its subtle cues for rest and/or emotional expression. Some other characteristics of polarized perfectionists are: extreme drive and competitiveness, tendency to isolate, obsessive/compulsive inclinations, inflexibility, and extremes of emotion. Often these musicians are unable to connect mind and heart in the process of playing music and spend hours in mindless musical activity. This kind of mindlessness during practice sessions, I believe, may be the root cause of many performance-related injuries and anxiety, essentially because - *the musician is not present while he or she is engaged in the musical activity*. It is when we are unable to be present in our lives that we harbor the gnawing feeling that something is missing.

So, you may ask, “What are the causes of polarized perfectionism?” One of my clients, a professional opera singer, brought in a deeply moving song with lyrics by Langston Hughes to one of her music therapy sessions. The words to the opening refrain subtly point to the root cause of this joy-sapping syndrome:

#### Heart

Pierrot took his heart and hung it on a wayside wall.

He said, look passersby, here is my heart.

But no one cared at all.  
No one cared that there hung Pierrot's heart upon the wall.  
So Pierrot took his heart and hid it far away.  
Now people wonder where his heart is today.

Most musicians with symptoms of polarized perfectionism have experienced some kind of narcissistic injury (as did Pierrot above) and/or performance-related abuse early in life, usually at the hands of unaware parents and teachers. For example, one of my clients who I will call Gary, a teenage prodigy from China, was very ambivalent about his burgeoning career as a solo violinist in New York City. He had already been performing at Carnegie Hall with rave reviews. His mood, however, was one of constant worry, anger, and bitterness. As I got to know Gary better over the course of his music therapy I learned that from age 5 to 10 his father would drag him out of bed at 6 o'clock every morning and force him to practice several hours in a dimly lit cold kitchen before going to school. If he dared to make a mistake, the young boy would be beaten with a broom handle. To add insult to injury, the boy was also deeply interested in world history and literature. His true aspiration was to become an historian and author. Gary's parents and teachers ignored the boy's desires, manipulating him, instead, to move forward on the prodigy path. Gary complied, but when he moved to New York City to perform and study, he became progressively apathetic and resistant. His teachers were alarmed and sent him to me for a consultation.

As Gary began to come to terms with his true career aspirations during the course of music therapy, mostly through exploring images and feelings that emerged from his musical improvisations and spontaneous song-writing, he was able to lighten up with respect to his musical career (after all, he was only 17 years old). He began to take college-level history and literature courses, started writing a journal, and began composing original music. The musical improvisation and journalling were superb ways for Gary to process his painful feelings related to the early manipulation and abuse. Soon he began to truly value the person that he was. He became less isolated and more

connected to his peers, and his relationship to music gained a new perspective as being just one part of his rich and fulfilling life.

While depth-oriented music therapy can be an effective treatment for the perfectionist syndrome in musicians, it is also quite possible to change overly perfectionistic attitudes and habits on your own by regularly practicing the following simple, playful exercises that can gently fill “the holes where the rain gets in” and take you to a place of serenity and fullness:

1. Waste time. This is probably one of the most difficult thing for a perfectionist to do consciously. Book stores, record stores, playgrounds, beautiful places in nature . . . just a few venues where you can refrain from doing and let yourself unwind and enter the imaginal realm.
2. Meditate. Spend about 10-20 minutes each day focusing inward. Allow yourself to be completely alone and undisturbed, sitting comfortably with your spine straight and focusing on the rhythm of your breath. If a thought comes up, just observe it, let it go, and return your focus to your breathing. In a short while, your body-mind will begin to relax and a warm glow will begin to emanate out from the center of your being. Meditation helps you to shut out the external world and to and connect deeply with the source of your being - your essential self.
3. Improvise. Yes, you *can* improvise! In all of my years working with classical musicians, I have never found one who couldn't improvise. If you feel uncomfortable improvising with your primary instrument, choose one that you enjoy “playing.” A good place to start is to just pick up your instrument, center yourself and breathe deeply, connecting with the “energy garden” in your belly. Listen for your first note. Sound that note and then wait for the next one. Play the next note and continue to listen for the succeeding notes - then just let go and let the music take you where you need to go. Improvisation also connects you to your creative source and strengthens the body-mind connection. Additionally, it's a lot of fun. Do it regularly.

4. **Improvise with others.** Get together with a group of your most creative musician friends and jam. You do not have to set a theme for the improvisation. Just allow yourselves a few seconds to ground and center, and then begin to play, being aware of your own contribution and that of your friends, letting the music again take the group where it needs to go. Please consider recording the improvisation. You will be surprised how wonderful free improvisations can sound. Spend some time processing the experience afterwards. This will help you all to understand the unique roles each of you plays within the group, and how the force of the music affected each of you individually, and the group as a whole.
5. **Get to know your “inner critic.”** The inner critic is the “wind beneath the wings” of the uncompromising perfectionist. But most often it is a foul wind. If you truly listen to the inner dialogue that goes on in your head around difficult performance issues, you can begin to discriminate the difference between helpful criticism like “You need to take more time to ground and center yourself before playing the first note of the *Italian Concerto* at your upcoming recital,” coming from the self, and destructive criticism like, “You are not good enough to play the *Italian Concerto*. Who do you think you are? You better start thinking about selling shoes instead of playing music,” which comes from voices of negative teachers and/or family members that are usually internalized when we are quite young and become part of our self-concept. You can change this negative self-talk by examining the validity of the statements. If the self-talk can truly serve you in some way, then you can continue to allow it to inform you. If you sense it is untrue or cruel or exaggerated, choose to let it go and replace it with an affirmation that will serve you, such as, “I am well-prepared and joyfully give my very best in my upcoming performance of the *Italian Concerto*.” As you let go of the negative energy of the inner critic, perfectionism can return to its normal function in your musical life, and playing music can once again become an awesome adventure.
6. **Nurture yourself.** A very old, yet spry participant in one of my music and healing workshops told the class that if they all didn’t feel like God’s perfect children, then there indeed was something wrong. So, take some time each day to acknowledge your innate perfection and take good care of yourself - treat yourself to healthy food,

good music, relaxing baths and massage, and quality time with yourself and loved ones.

I encourage all of you to explore one or more of the above techniques for de-polarizing perfectionism and achieving harmony and balance in your lives. Even with devoted practice, however, it might take quite a while to unravel the paradox of the creative void. In the meantime, let us agree that, yes, there is something missing . . . but for those who have let go of the compulsive need to be perfect and uncovered the essential self, there is only an ongoing celebration in anticipation of what is to come!

Dr. Louise Montello is a licensed psychoanalyst, board-certified music therapist and former research scientist in the Department of Psychology at NYU, specializing in the treatment and prevention of stress in the performing arts. She is the founder and director of Performance Wellness, Inc., and director of the Creative Arts Therapy Certificate Program at The New School. Dr. Montello is also a professional jazz pianist and composer and maintains a private practice in expressive therapy and supervision in New York City.