

“You have to be the best, but you also have to be the worst ”: Interpellation in Graduate Classical Music Lessons

John Mirsky

University of Michigan at Ann Arbor

Abstract: Why do individuals of the same social position, inculcated with many of the same norms and interpellated by the same institutions, experience and interact with the world differently? This article investigates this question in the empirical case of the graduate music performance professors and students aimed at professorship. In doing so, this paper advances theories of interpellation by putting in conversation Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* and interactionist focuses on “the situation” through interrogating dynamics of the music lesson at graduate-level music conservatories, a dyadic situation characterized by only two social actors. Drawing on 37 semi-structured interviews with professors and graduate students in the field of music, this paper demonstrates that interactions in feedback-providing sessions (lessons, conversations, and juries) are structured by the dispositions the student and professor have developed over their experiences in the field. Experiences with previous music teachers and parents found to be especially important. Most broadly, the study highlights the case of classical musical actors as a key yet understudied site for sociological analysis.

Introduction

Recent debates within the sociology of interpellation shed new light on an old problem. On the one hand, there exists dramatic uniformity within the norms, habits, dispositions, and schemas that social actors of similar positions hold (Althusser 2014; Martin 1998; Bourdieu 1995; Zerubavel 2009). On the other hand, despite these congruences, social actors of similar positions experience the world and interact with others in radically different ways (Berger and Luckman 1966; Duran 2024)

In this article, I explain why graduate classical music students respond differently to the feedback from their professors, and I develop a theory of interpellation that can explain why, and how similarly-situated individuals still diverge widely in sense making. I take music students as my unit of analysis for several reasons. First, music students are interpolated through a wide variety of what Althusser (2014: 75) refers to as the institutions of “concrete, material support” for Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). These ISA institutions include schools, families, places of worship, media, and the broadly-defined “cultural” institution (ibid: 92). As I will demonstrate, classical music students are shaped by these institutions *en route* to graduate study in the conservatory. Second, the learning is embodied—it involves learning to comport one’s body in nuanced ways and control its movement rigorously (DeNora 2010: 8; Kingsbury 2001). Even the most macro-level theories of interpellation find embodiment to be a key mechanism in formation of subjectivity (Althusser 2014: 83; Hegel 2013: 192-194). Finally, and most importantly, it involves a one-on-one, or dyadic, form of interaction in the form of the music lesson. This situation is incredibly rare in today’s efficiency-maximizing world. Most pedagogical practices take place at the macro scale, either in a large-lecture hall or, increasingly, over the internet and social media interfaces. Even among more micro pedagogical forms, it is typical for multiple students to exist per teacher present. Group lessons are standard for tasks that are performed solo, such as dance and yoga. Music lessons are classic examples of interpellative dynamics as a clear hierarchy is present—teacher and student

The foundational texts of interpellation exist at a high plane of abstraction, focusing on macro-level phenomena such as the state (Althusser 2014; Foucault 2009) or serving as wholly philosophical texts (e.g. Lacan 2001:1-3; Hegel 1977). More recent interactionist-inspired work focuses analysis on more granular phenomena, such as interpellative styles” rather than the

interpellation process in macrocosm (Winfield 2022; Tavory 2016). Yet, scholars have largely neglected the study of dyadic relationships, thus missing mechanisms of subject formation most closely seen when analyzing a single subject. My article takes inspiration from this interactionist tradition's methodological approach, and focuses even more closely on "the situation" by analyzing dyadic dynamics in the classical music lesson. The study of dyadic interactions is bolstered with tools found outside of interactionist circles. These tools can be found in a perhaps surprising place: the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Somewhat outside his general goal to disrupt the oppositions of micro and macro analysis, much of Bourdieu's work on education in earnest takes place at the dyadic level—between teacher and student. (e.g. Bourdieu 2000; 2008).

Drawing on over 100 hours of ethnographic fieldwork (such as attending and participating in masterclasses and lessons) and interviews with 37 people, I argue that music classical music students' responses to professor feedback can be understood through a close reading of their trajectories or, stated more sociologically, how they became "subjects." Like other educational and vocational pursuits, students invested in classical musical careers acquire a wide array of forms of capital across time, including economic, social, and cultural in institutionalized, embodied, and symbolic varieties (Bourdieu 2011; Lareau and Weininger 2003; Lareau and Calarco 2012; Armstrong and Hamilton 2015; Nunez-Naranjo et al. 2024).¹ In studying subject formation at the dyadic level with inspiration from intersubjectivity, I theorize this process with a higher degree of specificity.

¹ Also in accord with previous literature, I find that these forms of capital position are exchanged for one another and position actors on vectors within social space (Bourdieu 2011: 79; Young and Billings 2024; Breinholt and Jaeger 2020)

Music and Society

Since the early days of the discipline, sociologists have considered the study of music important in understanding social processes (Elais 1993; Schutz 1976; Weber 2013; Adorno 1998). Today, most research on the sociology of music fits under the road umbrella of the production and consumption binary (McCormick 2012; Becker 2008; Dowd 2004; Pior 2013: 184-185). Production paradigm scholars focus on the constraints and possibilities for music creation (Becker 2008; Dowd 2004; Peterson 1994; Bourdieu 1993). By contrast, consumption paradigm scholars study listening behaviors of social groups (Bourdieu 1984; Pitcher 2014; Prior 2013; Larsen 2010; Chan and Goldthorpe 2012; Kowsari 2023).

The performance perspective emerged in response to the production and consumption literatures at the turn of the 21st century. Inspired by cultural sociologist Jeffrey Alexander's (2004; 2011) work on social performance and musicologist Christopher Small's (1998) paradigm shift from "music" to "musicking," performance scholars treat music making, not as merely a cultural product, but instead as a social process (Eyerman and McCormick 2006; McCormick 2015a; 2015b; 2012; Picaud 2022). Music sociologist Lisa McCormick's large oeuvre on international music competitions (e.g. McCormick 2009) and Nicholas Cook's research on "social scripts" mobilized in musical performances and rehearsals process (Cook 2013; 2024) are two of the more prominent figures within this subfield.

Performance scholars approach their topics of inquiry from a more cultural than economic perspective, focusing on how actors display for others the meaning of their social situation (Alexander 2004: 529). This cultural emphasis on the situation facilitates fruitful dialogue between performance and interactionist perspectives, especially those which include an

element of performance. In particular, the opaque phenomena of interpellation which has long been the terrain of interactionists can be further elucidated.

Interpellation, Intersubjectivity, and Habitus

Interpellation is a specific type of “subject-formation,” a broad philosophical theory about the development of dispositions in which individuals are called or “hailed” by an authority figure to behave in a certain way (Althusser 2014; Lacan 2001; Butler 1984). Ideology shapes the manner in which individuals are called to act. Although social theories of various flavors emphasize different forms of ideology, (such as class, gender, race, sexuality, and linguistic), at the broadest level, interpellative ideology simply refers to how people make sense of the world; “ideology is itself a reality” (Althusser 2014: 236). Rather than a snapshot occurrence, interpellation is an ongoing process that develops over the life course of an individual. Different aspects of the self are cultivated at different time horizons. The reflex to stand when the pledge of allegiance or national anthem begins may not be inculcated until adolescence, but dispositions surrounding gender normativity and a more general deference to authority are cemented by an earlier age. Interpellation scholars argue that some ideological constructions are present even before social actors are born. Althusser (2014: 119) describes that patriarchal assumptions in Western capitalist societies are “always-already” present. Even before a biologically male child is born, it is expected “in advance” that the unborn child will bear the name of his father, given a heteronormative parental structure. As the interpellation process develops, three key events occur (Althusser 2014: 122-123). First, the individual being interpellation is “subject[ed] to the Subject,” or the bearer of authority, whether another individual or an institution. Second, there is a mutual recognition between the subject and the Subject about each other’s existence and where the power lies. Finally, the nature of the relationship becomes truly ideological, as no alternative

to the current state of affairs seems possible; there is an “absolute guarantee that everything really is so.”

The term has Foucauldian roots, as the French social theorist argued that subjects are created in hierarchical, binarized relationships fueled by power: teacher/student, sane/insane, state/citizen, and the like (Foucault 1980; 1982). Importantly, subjects are constituted historically, or “archeologically” (Foucault 1980; Kelly 2013: 513). The rationale behind creating social actors is largely arbitrary—what makes those labeled “insane” by the state have fewer freedoms than those labeled “sane”? For Foucault, the answer lay in power to control bodies and minds. Althusser situated Foucault’s emphasis on power in the era of late 20th-century capitalism. For Althusser, subjects enmeshed in a capitalist mode of production were created for the interests of the ruling class. Key institutions were tied to Ideological State Apparatuses to mold docile subjects that would support the capitalist machine. The institutions of schools, families, places of worship, media, and broadly-defined “cultural” institutions were especially important (Althusser 2014: 92).

Interactionist Perspectives on Interpellation

Although interpellation was originally a (neo)-Foucauldian concept, serious study of the theory has been the domain primarily of symbolic-interactionists, whom Cahil (1998: 135) helpfully describes as scholars invested in “interactional production of the person.” Symbolic interactionist perspectives investigate the complex dynamics through which actors develop and negotiate the subjective views about what other people think about them, a set of phenomena conceptualized as “intersubjectivity” (Tavory 2023: 865; Schutz 1970). George Herbert Mead first made central intersubjectivity in sociological analysis with his concepts of the “I” and the

“me.”² Erving Goffman extended Mead’s approach to focus on the face-to-face social interactions in which one’s sense of self is created, a domain he referred to as the “interaction order” (Goffman 1983:2).

Interactionists were quick to point out that Althusser’s theory of interpellation was situated at such a high level of abstraction that it was devoid of any detail on subjects themselves. Towards the aim of bringing Althusser’s idealized account back to earth, interactionist contributions on subject-formation are typically micro in scale, using interview and ethnographic data to analyze the “situation” in which actors actually socially perform (e.g. Tavory 2010; Goffman 1999; Force 2025). For example, in her ethnographic research with Orthodox Jewish outreach organizations, Winfield (2022) discusses the particular “interpellative styles” that create subjects of different kinds and in different ways. How social actors come to subjective perceptions is largely a process of semiotic association and embodied learning born from socialization. Familial and educational institutions are especially important in the forming of perceptions (e.g. Althusser 2014). Martin (1998: 504) demonstrates that perceptions of males as naturally authoritative, emotionally reserved, and loud begin being formed as early as pre-school. Yang (2025: 366) shows that even feminist parents unconsciously socialize their children to prefer stereotypical toys tied to their gender identity through “selective attention.” Interactionists aren’t just interested in how subjects come to develop their identities. They also study how interaction rituals are maintained (Goffman 1955; 1982; Clementson 2016: 248)

Interaction rituals are maintained largely through the dual processes of “deference” and “demeanor” (Goffman 1967). Deference refers to the activity “by which appreciation is regularly

²The “me” refers to the subjective view of how other social actors perceive an individual, and the “I” is the “response to the me,” usually conceptualized as a form of praxis (Mead 2015: 175).

conveyed” (ibid: 56). Conversely, demeanor refers to activity that expresses “to those in his immediate presence that he is a person of certain desirable and undesirable qualities” (ibid: 56; Halett 2007: 149). Through the dual processes of deference and demeanor, social actors mutually maintain interactions and can repair them if things go awry. While idealized conceptual interaction is relatively straightforward, social interactions in practice are far more complex. The empirical study of interaction maintenance is especially complicated by the fact that social actors are of course not always on the same playing field.

Power dynamics within interactions are key to understanding maintenance of interaction rituals. Traditional bearers of authority typically have more autonomy, while those with less authority typically have less autonomy. In an interaction between a feudal lord and a serf, the lord freely chooses the topics of conversation while the serf is resigned to deferentially navigating the communicative landscape. In practice, power imbalances social actors in an interaction are more complex than the idealized heuristic; “assymetric” interactions are in truth ambivalent and dialectical (Hall 1982: 311). When individuals with low levels of authority are idiosyncratically granted more autonomy, the effects are often highly unexpected and varied. Hall (1982: 325) goes as far to state in any power relationship, a crucial point occurs when the “other(s) fails to respond as anticipated.”

The individuals I interviewed and observed were shaped predominantly by their interactions with authority figures, whether it be parents or members of educational institutions. I theorize that, when people with less authority are granted more autonomy, they engage in hermeneutic cues based on their previous experiences with authority figures to gauge what the current person in power *really* meant. To understand where these hermeneutic cues come from, one needs to analyze factors which transcend and predate the interaction rituals. In order to

incorporate a more historical and nuanced perspective of subject-formation, I propose some of the conceptual toolkit of Pierre Bourdieu as an intervention into the interactionist conceptual space of interpellation.

Bourdieuian Perspectives on Interpellation

For Bourdieusians, subjects are created through the accumulation of capital and experiences. Forms of capital are regularly exchanged for each other to create a cumulative advantage (e.g. Bourdieu 1984: 291). Through the accumulation of capital, social actors develop a *habitus*, or a series of “durable, transposable dispositions” that both shape and are shaped by material and cultural structure (Bourdieu 2008: 53; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 18; Sewell 1992). It is not primarily a conscious process, but is instead a “craft” or a practical sense of how to deal with problems (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 145). Its structure is similar to the “generative grammar” of Noam Chomsky and other structural linguists in that it provides a template for action, whether linguistic or social (Bourdieu 1990: 9; 1992: 145; Hanks 2005; Lizardo 2004; Myles 1999). Discussions of capital accumulation are far from deterministic. Social actors constantly move in social space as capital forms are gained, lost, and exchanged with other forms in sui generis ways that make a social physics impossible in such an “overdetermined” environment (Bourdieu 2011; Steinmetz 2011).

Bridging Habitus and Intersubjectivity to Theorize Interpellation

Bringing interactionist and Bourdieusian theories of interpellation together bridges two important literatures in contemporary sociology and helps us understand how subjects are simultaneously interpolated by similar institutions and end up with different dispositions. This article takes particular inspiration from Bourdieu’s mature research, which incorporates many

benefits from the interactionist camp. Bourdieu describes the process of subject-formation as a “dialectic” between what he refers to as the “subjective” and the “objective,” part of a broader aim to link the micro with the macro and theory with praxis (Bourdieu 1990: 126; 1980).

Through the life course analysis of musical actors, the article demonstrates how differing embodied learning practices shape reception to professor feedback.. This argument is empirically made with qualitative and ethnographic methods employed with graduate students and professors at classical music conservatories.

In what follows, I argue that, in the case of classical music conservatory students and professors, the embodied knowledge of both the professor and the student shapes how musical subjects are created.

Data and Methods

In order to document and critically examine the experiences of actors in the classical-music conservatory space, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 37 people. To be included in the study, participants had to be at least 18 years old and be a student or a professor in a music conservatory.

The interview guide covered an array of topics. It began with a life-history of the participant, starting with their musical beginnings and culminating in their present location within the field. Topics included one’s experience receiving and providing feedback in music lessons, the pedagogies of their teachers and themselves, attendance at musical festivals, parental involvement, and musical practice strategies.

I complemented my in-depth interview data by drawing on extensive ethnographic observations and active participation within the space. I took part in two music festivals, the Chamber Music Collective hosted at Bucknell University and Center Stage Strings hosted at the University of Michigan. At these festivals, I observed concerts, rehearsals, formal and informal gatherings, and participated in composition and performance practice workshops, lessons, as well as embodied Alexander Technique sessions.

During my data collection, I often occupied a liminal space between researcher and participant. Through a combination of observation and participation, I studied my topic of inquiry from different perspectives. As a former music student and continuing amateur musician, I acquired some of the cultural capital to make sense of the space and actively participate in masterclasses, workshops, and lessons. On the other hand, as someone with some distance from the truly rigorous study of music that my respondents engage in, I could observe with some distance their idiosyncratic interactions. Sampling for the study relied on snowball sampling after initial recruiting. Interviews were completed in a variety of settings, ranging from classrooms to practice rooms to offices to informal meetings in cafes, restaurants, and distilleries. In order to accommodate certain respondents, 11 interviews were also conducted over zoom. Interviews were roughly 30-90 minutes, with most interviews lasting about 50 minutes.

Analytic Approach

Interview data were transcribed using otter.ai, a paid online transcription service and initial coding was done by hand and simultaneously with NVivo, and results were compared. The analysis drew from thematic and abductive analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; Tavory and

Timmermans 2022). Themes included one's personal and social background, embodied learning processes, pedagogical approaches, and expectations of conservatory experiences.

The classical music conservatory is the site of a “field of struggles” in more ways than one. To even make it to the starting line, many pieces must fit neatly together. But the processes that create these pieces have more effects than simply allowing entrance to the conservatory; they shape the *habitus* of the students.

Interpellation and Habitus

To reach even the starting point of a classical music career, the music conservatory, many things have to go “right.” While music-making ability is often seen as an in-born quality (“he/she/they are so talented!”) examination of musicians' lives tells a wholly different story. Bruno (a 65-year old cello professor and former traveling soloist) made this point clear while in the living room of his home right after his 10 a.m. cello lesson had concluded. Reflecting on his nearly fifty-year career in the elite circles of classical music, Bruno joked begrudgingly about the compliments he would receive after his concerts. Audience members would laud Bruno, stating “you’re so talented this and you’re so talented that.” They would say “I used to play piano when I was in kindergarten but I just never had the latent,” but never say “I didn’t practice for hours a day for forty years” or “I didn’t get calluses on my hands that resulted in a permanent indentation to match my cello strings.”

Bruno’s critique is in concert with scholarship on capital accumulation involved in educational and vocational pursuits (Tramonte and Willms 2010; Lareau and Weininger 2003; Wossman 2024). In the musical field specifically, whatever musical skill one is genetically predisposed with, this skill requires social interaction to be expressed.

A paradigmatic example of the necessity of opportunities for musical expression is the starting process. Children rarely discover their interest in musical instruments all on their own. Youngsters require introduction by some means, often by a parent, a teacher, or a guardian. George, a Bassoon professor, reminisced that his musical journey began as a young child “fooling around on the piano” he had in his house by virtue of his mother being an elementary school music teacher. Although he didn’t take formal lessons on piano until he was in college, George relayed that his earlier piano exposure still has its impact felt in his career as a bassoon professor. In his words, “I got just fluent enough on piano that I am fearless to attack, and ruin [laughs] everything for my students, just to give them some sort of accompaniment in their lesson.” Charlie, an assistant professor of piano in a large southwest university, was also introduced to music through his parents. Although his parents “weren’t musical,” they enrolled Charlie in piano lessons when he was just four years old. This initial investment bore tremendous dividends, as he went on to take piano lessons throughout elementary school, middle school, high-school, college, and graduate school.

Musical parents are of paramount importance not only for one’s musical beginnings, but also for one’s prospects for success in a musical career. Of the ten college professors I interviewed, all but two had musical parents. Besides Charlie, whose parents nonetheless enrolled him in music lessons before he was five years old, the one exception was Emily, a professor of violin performance at a large midwestern university. Twenty-four seconds into our interview (and without being asked about this), Emily noted she “[does] not have musical parents.” However, in the second half of that same sentence, she recounted the extensive exposure to the musical arts that her parents provided, noting they “were involved in some cultural organizations that exposed them to...classical music.” Through these experiences, Emily was exposed to the “Talent

Education” pedagogical approach (also known as the Suzuki Method), a renowned Japanese mode of music education (Peak 1996). The investment of Emily’s parents led to private lessons, university study, and eventually one of the few coveted professor positions for violin performance offered at elite universities.

George spoke at length about the effects of his mother’s musical influence. In addition to piano, George’s mother introduced him to and provided him with a saxophone, which served as his introduction to the world of wind instruments. Charlotte, an Indonesian piano Doctoral student in Musical Arts (DMA, roughly the equivalent of a PhD in musical performance), reflected on how her mother, a piano teacher, influenced her musical journey. Her mother encouraged Charlotte to begin piano at a young age and served as her teacher for over a decade. Additionally, Charlotte’s mom secured her daughter with a preeminent teacher who paved the way for her conservatory career. Charlotte told me that her mom “built, like, a very good foundation” for her and is “really good with basics,” which provided Charlotte with “lots of tools” towards her musical journey.

With these tools in place, Charlotte was fashioned as a subject well positioned to the dyadic interactionist position of the music lesson. Charlotte recalls that, during her first lesson in graduate school, she “knew instantly” that her teacher believed in her. “He was looking so carefully at my technique—I could just tell right away that he saw all of my technical skills and believed I could be something special.”

If it takes 10,000 hours of practice to make it to Carnegie Hall, it should be emphasized that one needs a place to practice that is suited for the task. The location in which training occurs and the resources made available to social actors in that location are crucial for success in cultural fields

(Newport 2016). Like the painter's studio or the footballer's training facility, the quality of the musician's practice room is a prime contributor to cultural capital acquisition.

My interviewees spoke at length about the environment in which their practice takes place. Some students discussed elaborate, open environments full of the tools they needed for successful practice. One such example came from Jennifer, a recent DMA graduate in piano performance and current piano instructor at an elite midwestern university. She noted that her parents bought a grand piano, which they placed in the living room, and took painstaking steps to not be a "bother." Her father always resigned himself to the basement to work from home, and her mother was always at work. During evenings, her parents made themselves scarce, taking phone calls in other rooms, watching television with the volume off, and overall doing "their best not to bother [her]."

By contrast, Lisa, a DMA student at that same university, noted extreme difficulties in finding practice opportunities during high school. She said that she had a "tiger dad" but in a "reverse kind of way." Her parents did not approve of her committing to a piano career, only allowing her to practice one hour per day while other parents required their children to "practice [at least] two to three." Additionally, Lisa was not allowed to practice "past 6:30 or 7," crucial uninterrupted practice hours after school. And the rule is still held up today. "When I'm visiting, I just can't practice past 6:30 p.m. My dad gets back from work and he just wants silence" she explained. With the one-hour limit in place, Lisa took extreme measures to get in a few extra minutes of practice. Throughout middle school to high school, Lisa skipped lunch "basically every day to get like, an extra half hour or forty minutes."

With such little time to practice, Lisa began experiencing insecurities, feeling that she “wasn’t good enough.” “How could I possibly stack up to people who practiced 7 or 8 hours a day?” Lisa described her lessons across a wide variety of teachers as “traumatic,” a pattern that remained intact during her graduate study. Despite studying with professors she described as “very patient” and understanding, Lisa was sure that she “brought him plates of trash every week.”

But having an adequate space is not enough, as effective practice of a musical instrument is a skill that must be carefully trained. A panel of professors made this point explicitly during a public lesson at the University of Michigan’s elite summer program Center Stage Strings. On an early Monday morning, I was surprised to find Hankinson Rehearsal Hall filled to the brim of students aged twelve to twenty-six, so densely populated that the hall’s purpose to accommodate “large instrumental ensembles” was rendered entirely useless with over thirty students resigned to sit by the back wall on the floor, unable to see the professors speaking to them. Near the end of the session, the founder of the program, professor of violin Danielle Belen, asked the programs’ faculty to reflect on what they consider productive practice techniques: in her words, “if you were walking past your student’s practice room, what would you like to hear?” The panelists were quick to provide their thoughts without much need for reflection.

One professor noted that, “something that drives me crazy is when I hear students just running through their pieces, just playing them through again and again. Like that’s not going to help you at all. I much prefer to hear slow practice, perhaps practice on just one section very slowly. That helps the student actually accomplish something.” Another stressed the use of a metronome to help keep metrical time. “The metronome doesn’t lie! I think people constantly underestimate the power of the metronome. A teacher I really hold in high esteem has

metronomes all over his office—that way, no matter what he’s looking at, he can check in with his metrical accuracy.”

How does one learn the skill of effective practice? Like many sorts of cultural capital, the answer lies largely in socialization. Having a private teacher is essential for success, or even entrance to, the classical music space. Every single respondent reported taking extensive private lessons since childhood, most often beginning before age five and all of which continuing lessons during the time of our conversation. Differing perspectives was also crucial to student success. All of my interviewees reported having multiple teachers (the minimum being three) on their road to music conservatory, and many of the teachers were highly accomplished—placing highly in international competitions, securing positions at elite universities and top orchestras, and other elaborate decorations.

To be truly successful in the musical arts, one requires a great deal of instructor investment. This was clear from the “positive cases” of career success, the professors in my sample. All of them reported strong instructor investment that went above and beyond their expectations. John Ellis, the director of Graduate Studies in Piano Pedagogy at the University of Michigan, spoke at length about a wide variety of mentors taking elaborate steps to support his musical journey, none more important than composer and pianist Arthur Cunningham. In addition to regular lessons ranging from classical to jazz, performance to embodiment to music theory to improvisation, Arthur provided John with a wide range of professional opportunities, including coordinating other musicians to play with John at jazz and classical gigs.

The road to the conservatory is a long one, and not all lineages look the same. Although all of my interlocutors made it to this stepping stone and acquired the exact same institutionalized

cultural capital and purportedly other forms of cultural capital, their experiences molded them into different subjects, subjects that respond with action differently from professor feedback.

Experience in Lessons Prior to the Conservatory

A particularly relevant causal mechanism for how music students came to view their selfhood during dyadic lessons was one's experience with prior teachers. A salient case comes from Serena, an associate professor of piano, early music, and musicology at a liberal arts university. Serena had vivid and troubling memories of her first experience taking private lessons. Her teacher "was extremely harsh and possessive" and wanted to make sure that Serena was practicing at all times. "He would call me even at home, during the afternoons and evenings." This uncomfortable situation persisted for years while Serena was advancing through middle and high-school. Eventually, with the help of her peer group, Serena realized that this dyadic relationship was "toxic" and subsequently went on the search for a new teacher. After experimenting with a wide variety of teachers during her time in university, she eventually found what she was looking for. For her doctoral degree, Serena studied with Malcolm Bilson, an exemplar of pedagogy and performance, especially in the subfield that Serena focused on (Historically Informed Practice). Serena, and other students of Bilson, described the pedagogue as an intimidating figure. "Students would run out of the masterclasses crying, feeling totally inadequate" Serena recalled. In her lessons with Bilson, Serena described similar dynamics.

[Bilson] was very intimidating. He'd get very animated and he'd like, wave his hands around and yell at you, like "your left and right hands aren't coordinated" or "why does this sound the same way it did last week" and things like that. I got the feeling that he was disappointed with me.

However, unlike some of Bilson's less successful students, Serena refused to interpret her teacher's words as merely a sign of disappointment.

But that's not all—it would be a waste if that was it. I also felt that he was invested in my success. He wasn't just blowing me off. He was giving me specific things that I needed to work on. And so I practiced, I practiced as much as I could to address the specific issues that he raised. I developed a thick skin and got much better.

Serena's experience with her first keyboard instructor taught her what harsh feedback coming from a nefarious place looked like. Although many of Serena's colleagues were off-put and intimidated by Bilson's antics, Serena could see through this haze. She realized that his intentions in the dyadic interaction were to make her a better performer and pedagogue, and she mobilized this knowledge towards advancing her career. Thus, Serena's formation as a subject that reads harsh feedback in a careful and nuanced way can be traced to her habitus formation. This aspect of her subjectivity is expressed in the dyadic interaction of the music lesson.

Conversely from Serena's case, other students interpreted even much more tepid feedback as an indictment against their potential. Lisa, the conservatory pianist who lacked access to adequate practice facilities also struggled dramatically with self-confidence. Lisa noted that her struggles with confidence began with her second piano teacher, a woman from Japan who Lisa described as "completely different" from her first teacher. Lisa described her Japanese teacher as "very strict" who would yell at her often. Lisa conceded that her teacher "won't hit [her]," but she'd instead "pat you on your shoulders, like, kind of hard." Lisa remembered one case when her teacher reached a boiling point and threw a pencil in her general direction, which collided with her sheet music, creating a "huge slash."

Lisa's lessons with the Japanese teacher became a major source of stress as they progressed. She recalls getting "a lot of anxiety" because the teacher was "kicking out" Lisa's

friends because the teacher “wasn’t happy with their progress.” Lisa reflected on the situation: “Oh my god, am I next?”

This anxiety merged into depression and began affecting her grades, which caused Lisa to spiral further. Eventually, these struggles manifested physical and mental blocks during important performances. Lisa recalls being awarded the opportunity to play at David Geffen Hall, a major performing arts center in New York City. This dream opportunity for a young musician quickly became a nightmare. She recalls that “right in the middle of the piece, I suddenly blanked out, and then I stopped playing entirely. So I was really really sad afterwards.” These memory slips continued throughout her undergraduate experience. Her junior year, Lisa hosted a concert in which she performed both solo and chamber repertoire, a performance that she recalls as “the worst performance [she’s] had in her life.” Lisa found herself “paralyzed,” with “frozen” fingers and having frequent memory slips. Lisa was devastated by her performance. She recalls “sobbing” during the intermission, as well as when she was publicly greeting the audience.

With these experiences set in place, Lisa couldn’t believe that she was capable of doing anything well. During her experience in graduate school, she never described any negative feedback from professors. However, she was hyper-critical of herself and was certain the teachers simply did not have the heart to tell her of her failures. Lisa felt that she was doing the “bare minimum” and began to “barely practice.”

Lisa’s early experience with a harsh instructor was sufficiently traumatic that it rendered her view of instructors *in toto* critical of her work, whether or not they expressed it overtly. Thus,

although Lisa's conservatory teacher was decidedly not critical of her performance, Lisa figured that her teacher was hiding his true thoughts of her.

Conclusion

In response to the macro-level origins of interpellation theories, recent work on subject formation has increasingly brought back into the equation the concrete stories of social actors. This shift has borne much intellectual fruit. However, swinging the pendulum towards a micro-sociology of the situation risks losing sight of the historical processes and structures that intervene on social actors in the situation. To alleviate this concern, this article focuses on dyadic interactions in the music lesson. By focusing on only two social actors, the analyst has sufficient mental space to begin an understanding of the broader structures that constrain and enable the actions of the individuals.

This case helps us understand how actors in vocational educational institutions, both students and teachers, navigate trajectories within the space. Symbolic interactionist theory used to serve as a major springboard for empirical research in the domain of education. With its re-emergence within the sociological field, symbolic interactionist theory would bear intellectual fruit when applied to educational institutions, especially if it is enriched by field theory. Findings show the benefit of integrating frameworks from Bourdieusian and Subjectivist perspectives on educational institutions.

Despite their scant sociological attention, music conservatories serve as a window into a wide variety of social dynamics. Music-making is a combination of habituated practices and conscious decision-making. Thus, its close study through the use of qualitative methods sheds light on discussions within the sociology of cognition literature, especially the complex interplay

between type I and type II cognition (Swidler 1986; 2008; Boutyline and Soter 2021; Brekhus and Ignatow 2019; Vaisey 2009; 2014). Additionally, music conservatories are ideal institutions for the subfield of performance studies within cultural sociology to study, which have mostly focused on music-making in cases of international classical music competitions (McCormick 2009; 2015; 2017; 2020), hermeneutic studies of musical scores (Cook 2012; 2013) and professional performances (Atkinson 2004). Further study of the music conservatory and musical actors promises new data sources for the study of cultural institutions, and the social world.

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