Music Performance Anxiety Among Undergraduates Piano Majors

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Abstract

The experience of anxiety when performing music is considered problematic for musicians of various levels. Feelings of fear and nervousness when perform music in front of audience also happened in pianist. By knowing the concept of anxiety, hopes both lecturer and students can reduce this syndrome. This article aims to determine the characteristics of anxiety that appear in undergraduates piano majors. Literature review method was conduct to search information related to MPA on undergraduates piano majors. The results of this study are MPA in undergraduates piano majors occurs due to internal factors including gender, lack of practice, perfectionist student character and piano students’ perceptions of the audience and the future careers and external factors which include the piano learning process mostly uses a teacher centered approach, teacher and audience evaluations of piano student performances, and room conditions.

Introduction

Everyone has experienced anxiety (Coolidge and Shannon, 2017; Feiring, 1983). For music players, for example, the research results show that both amateurs, students, and professional music players have experienced anxiety when performing music (Paliaukiene et al., 2018). This is something that is natural because anxiety is a part of human emotions. However, at a certain level, anxiety can be unnatural because it can have a bad effect on the body (Barlow in Burin and Osórío, 2017). Several other studies have also explained that anxiety is considered a problematic matter for musicians of various levels, from professional musicians, amateurs or students (Boucher and Ryan, 2011; Kokotsaki and Davidson, 2003; LeBlanc et al., 1997; Rae and McCambridge, 2004; Ryan, 2005; Yoshie et al., 2009).

‘The experience of anxiety when performing music that arises with a combination of affective, cognitive, somatic and behavioral symptoms is called Music Performance Anxiety (MPA)’ (Kenny in Paliaukiene et al., 2018: 390). Some researchers say that MPA belongs to the social anxiety disorder subtype (Barlow, 1988; Clark and Agras, 1991; Osborne and Franklin, 2002). Such as the feeling of fear and nervousness in the pianists showing the playing of a musical instrument to others (Guven, 2015; Lagendorfer et al., 2006; Liu, 2016).

In fact, like language, music is an interactive and participatory medium (Small in Cross and Woodruff, 2009) where music becomes a medium for people to convey emotions, goals and meanings of messages from musicians to music listeners (Miell et al., 2005, 1-4). This view implies that the music player plays an active role while the music listener plays a passive role. However Miell et al. (2005: 4) argue that ‘in the context of music communication, listeners can play an active role in shaping the content and meaning of messages’. These two opinions imply that both musicians and music listeners play an active role in shaping the content and meaning of messages. So, how can listeners receive musical messages if the player is not performing well?

It is important for a pianist or piano teacher to know MPA because with this knowledge, both of them can try to overcome or reduce the MPA. Based on the MPA problem in undergraduates piano majors. (Allen,
2011; Guven, 2015; Liu, 2016) and the urgency of knowledge of MPA factors, in this literature review, the author wants to critically examine the internal and external factors of MPA in pianists.

Anxiety

Anxiety cannot be separated from human emotions (Rauf and Latif, 2018). Anxiety is described as an emotion based on an assessment of threats, an assessment that requires symbols of anticipation and elements of uncertainty (Spielberger, 1972). In line with Spielberger, Durand and Barlow (2006) describe ‘anxiety is a mood state characterized by negative effects and symptoms of physical tension in which a person anticipates the possibility of a coming danger or disaster with a feeling of worry’ (159).

Anxiety is classified into seven types, namely, general anxiety disorder, panic disorder, phobic disorder, agoraphobia, social anxiety disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Pathak et al, 2011). The following is a further explanation of these types of anxiety. Generalized anxiety disorder is a severe and chronic anxiety disorder (Nutt et al., 2002). Generalized anxiety disorder has the main characteristic of not being able to control anxiety (Grenier et al., 2018; Leonard and Abramovitch, 2019; Roomruangwom et al., 2018) felt for several days in the last 6 months with at least three symptoms or more than six symptoms such as feeling depressed or anxious, tired easily, difficulty concentrating or the mind becomes blank, irritability, muscle tension, sleep disturbances (Klinger, 2014).

Panic disorder is an unpredictable recurring panic attack that is followed by worrying about another panic attack. The possible implication or consequence of continuous panic attacks for one month is a significant change in behavior (American Psychiatric Association in Kumar and Malone, 2018). Panic disorder appears with symptoms of trembling, confusion, palpitations, dizziness, nausea, difficulty breathing, chest pain (Kumar and Malone, 2008; Rollman et al., 2006).

‘Phobic disorders are a disturbing fear of certain objects or situations, which are not proportional to the dangers they cause’ (DSM IV-TR in Singh and Singh, 2016: 593). Phobic disorders appear with symptoms of excessive and unreasonable desire to avoid the feared object or situation (Schmid et al., 2009) which is also usually followed by panic attacks (Singh and Singh, 2016).

Agoraphobia is a symptom of anxiety that involves the fear of being in a place, a difficult situation (embarrassing) or an unexpected event which is usually followed by a panic attack (Hara et al., 2012). A study states that the symptoms that most often appear in agoraphobia sufferers are dizziness and chest pain (Hara et al., 2012).

‘Social anxiety disorder is a persistent fear of one or more social situations in which shame can occur and that fear or anxiety is disproportionate to the actual threat posed by a social situation as determined by the cultural norms of the person’ (American Psychiatric Association in Taylor and Ernest, 2013: 15). Symptoms of social anxiety disorder are fear of embarrassment, fear of being the center of attention, fear of being embarrassed or looking stupid (Jefferson, 2001).

Obsession Compulsive Disorder. In this disorder, individuals feel compelled to perform security-related behaviors repeatedly, even though these behaviors seem excessive and unreasonable to them (Hinds et al., 2012). Symptoms that arise are like washing hands and checking things repeatedly (Hinds et al., 2012).

Post-traumatic stress disorder is an anxiety disorder that results from extreme trauma from childhood due to natural disasters, rape, hostage, or serious accidents (Pathak et al., 2011). A study states that symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder are positively correlated with symptoms of harm avoidance and self-transcendence such as caution, fear, shyness, fatigue, worry, nervousness, hopelessness, and sensitivity to criticism and punishment, individualistic, realistic, and non-religious (Calegaro et al., 2019).

Anxiety occurs due to various factors which are then divided into two groups of factors, namely internal factors and external factors. Internal factors in anxiety include stage fright, lack of self-confidence, and shame
Music performance anxiety

In general, performance anxiety affects the professional life of musicians, athletes, and other performing artists (American Psychiatry Association in Burin and Osorio, 2017). Everyone has experienced anxiety (Coolidge and Matlock, 1983) including music players (Boucher and Ryan, 2011) who have experienced anxiety during musical instrument practice, musical instrument performance exams, or musical performances (Castiglione, Rampullo and Cardullo, 2018; Guyon et al., 2020; Guven, 2015; LeBlanc et al., 1997). In the music field, performance anxiety is related to the term music performance anxiety (Papageorgi, Hallam, and Welch, 2007; Ryan and Andrews, 2009; Taborsky, 2007). Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) is an experience of anxiety associated with a musical performance that takes place continuously and arises through biological, psychological in general and psychological in particular such as certain anxiety conditioning experiences. MPA is a type of social anxiety disorder (Burin and Osorio, 2017; Guyon et al., 2020; Matei and Ginsborg, 2017; Nicholson, Meghan and J. Gayle, 2014) which appears with a combination of affective, cognitive, somatic and behavioral symptoms (Allen, 2011; Kenny, 2011; Liu, 2016; Robson and Kenny, 2017). ‘There are affective symptoms such as feelings of anxiety, tension, fear or panic’ (Steptoe, 2001: 295); ‘cognitive errors such as loss of concentration, memory errors, misreading of scores; behaviors such as wrong technique, wrong posture, shaking of certain body parts; physiological (somatic) reactions such as respiratory distress, salivation, heart rate, gastrointestinal function; and hormonal imbalances such as excessive release of epinephrine and cortisol’ (Kenny, 2011: 49).

MPA is influenced by genetic factors such as gender (Patston and Osborne 2015; Rae and McCambridge, 2004). Genetic factors in MPA are also inseparable from performance experience factors (Boucher and Ryan, 2011) and post-show evaluation (Nielson et al., 2018). Meanwhile, Kenny and Osborne’s research (2006: 103) states that,

MPA is caused by several factors such as innate temperament; anxiety nature; enhancement of cognitive capacity, function of self-reflection and capacity for perspective taking that develops through childhood and adolescence; the kinds of parenting and other interpersonal experiences we have; our perceptions and interpretations of the world around us; technical skills and technical mastery; and special performance experiences that may have positive or negative results; technical skills and previous experience associated with the show.

Several researchers offer solutions to overcome MPA, namely coping strategies. Coping strategies are a basic category used to classify how humans deal with stress (Rabenu and Yaniv, 2017). In the context of music, coping strategies are the behaviors and thoughts that musicians use to deal with MPA. The coping strategies used by musicians include the use of drugs such as beta blockers, marijuana, cocaine (Matei and Ginsborg, 2017; Sostar et al., 2009) and without drugs such as consuming alcohol, getting social support (Biasutti, 2014), having dialogue with oneself by using positive sentences (self-positive talks), deep breathing, more careful preparation, hypnotherapy, meditation, relaxation, and Alexander techniques (Burin, 2017; Lagendorfer et al., 2006). The use of drugs and alcohol is not recommended to be used as a solution to overcome MPA. This is because it can ruin a musician’s career, creating an addictive effect. It is bad for the physical and mental health of musicians and can even result in death (Burland and Davidson, 2002; Ginsborg, Kreutz, Thomas, and Williamson, 2009; Just et al., 2016; Williamson and Thompson, 2006).

Music performance anxiety in undergraduates piano majors

There are several research findings about the symptoms and factors of MPA in undergraduates piano majors (Guven, 2015; Kılıç, 2018; Liu, 2016). Güven’s (2015) research was conducted by interviewing ten music education students in Turkey before and after taking the piano exam. Before the piano exam, Güven asked what students thought when Güven said “Piano Test” and how they defined it. The results showed that
three students felt calm and seven other students showed symptoms of MPA such as fear, nervousness, stress, feeling unprepared, and anxious. After the piano exam, Güven asked what students thought during the piano exam. The results showed that five students felt calm, while the other three students showed symptoms of MPA such as nervousness and lack of confidence and the other two students showed symptoms such as lack of focus and affective symptoms such as lack of confidence. In addition, Güven again asked what students thought when Güven said “Piano Test” and how they defined it. Then the results showed that the ten piano exam participants felt comfortable and relieved. One of the MPA factors in students who take the piano exam above is the student’s own perception of the environment (audience). This is shown by the results of Güven’s interviews with nine out of ten students who took the piano exam to admit that the presence of other people such as strangers, strangers, or the piano teacher during the exam can increase anxiety. In addition, there are other factors that can increase the level of anxiety of a pianists, such as lecturers coming in and out of the room, loud piano keys, misaligned piano tunes, lecturers who cough, and the room is hot.

In another study, Liu (2016) conducted MPA-related research on 122 piano students at three universities located in southern Taiwan, including Tainan National University of the Arts, Tainan University of Technology, and National University of Tainan. Data collection began with two MPA questionnaires which included the State Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) and the Performance Anxiety Inventory (PAI). After collecting the questionnaire data, it was found that twenty participants got high anxiety scores, which indicated a greater level of anxiety than other participants. Then the twenty participants were selected to be resource persons in the semi-structured interview. The findings of this study were that participants experienced MPA with symptoms of feeling less confident about their abilities, afraid of being compared and judged by others, decreased concentration in playing the piano, sweating, shaky hands marked by incorrectly playing the melody and resulting in decreased performance quality. The MPA factor for participants is that participants have perfectionism, lack of self-confidence, evaluation and criticism from the audience and pressure from teachers and parents.

In contrast to the two studies above, Kılıç (2018) conducted MPA-related research on piano exams on 281 music education students at three western Turkish universities. Data collection was carried out with the participant’s personal information form which included questions about gender, piano ownership, age and student learning period. The result of the study was that there was no statistically significant difference in the MPA level of male and female students. Additionally, students’ MPA levels vary significantly based on their piano ownership. Those who owned a piano were less worried than those who did not. Student age does not have a significant effect on the MPA anxiety level on the piano exam. This study also found that students’ learning period had a significant effect on their level of performance anxiety. Fourth year students have the most anxiety and first year students the least. This indicates that fourth year students are anxious about graduation and their future. In addition, the fear of not being able to get a job after graduation creates anxiety for students. The MPA can also increase because senior students don’t prepare enough for their piano exams.

Discussion

MPA in pianist is a type of social anxiety disorder (Burin and Osório, 2017; Guyon et al., 2020; Matei and Ginsborg, 2017; Nicholson, Meghan and J. Gayle 2014). At a certain level MPA can affect the quality of piano playing (Hamann, 1982; Lagendörfer et al., 2006; Yoshie et al., 2009) both in a public performance and rehearsal (Robson and Kenny, 2017; Tang and Ryan, 2020; Yoshie et al., 2009) and both piano performance with assessment and non-assessment (Güven, 2015; Craske and Craig, 1984). This can have implications for the career life of a pianists (Kenny, 2011; Huang, 2018). To prevent this, a solution is needed, one of which is by understanding the knowledge of MPA symptoms and factors. With this knowledge, both teachers and students can seek to overcome MPA through non-medical measures such as cognitive behavioral therapy (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy), yoga, meditation, music therapy and Alexander techniques (Burin and Osório, 2016: 1) or through coping mechanisms (Liu, 2016).
There are discussions on several studies related to MPA symptoms and factors in pianists in college (Güven, 2015; Kılıç, 2018; Liu, 2016) which the authors will describe in the following explanation. Güven (2015) interviewed five music education students in Turkey before and after taking piano exams. Before the piano exam, Güven asked what students thought when Güven said “Piano Test” and how they defined it. The results showed that three students felt calm and seven other students showed MPA with affective symptoms (Steptoe, 2001) such as fear, nervousness, stress, feeling unprepared, and anxious. After the piano exam, Güven asked what students thought during the piano exam. The results showed that five students felt calm, while the other three students showed MPA with affective symptoms (Steptoe, 2001) such as nervousness and lack of self-confidence, and two other students showed MPA with cognitive symptoms (Kenny, 2011) such as unfocused and affective symptoms such as lack of confidence. In addition, Güven again asked what students thought when Güven said “Piano Test” and how they defined it. Then the results showed that the ten piano exam participants felt comfortable and relieved. One of the MPA factors in students who take the piano exam above is psychological factors which are then grouped into internal factors (Rajitha and Alamelu, 2020), namely the student's own perception of the environment (audience). This is shown by the results of Güven’s interviews with ten students who took the piano exam that nine out of ten students admit that the presence of other people such as strangers, strangers, or the piano teacher during the exam can increase anxiety. In addition, there are external factors (Ahulu, Gyasi-Gyamerah and Anum, 2020; Kabiru et al., 2010) that can increase the level of anxiety of pianists, such as lecturers who come in and out of the room, loud piano keys, false piano tune, the lecturer who coughed, and the room was hot.

In Liu’s (2016) study, students experienced affective symptoms such as feeling less confident about their abilities and feeling afraid of being compared and judged by others. Cognitive symptoms characterized by decreased concentration in playing the piano and incorrectly playing the melody. Somatic symptoms such as sweating and behavioral symptoms such as trembling hands when playing the piano. Symptoms of MPA occur due to internal factors (Rajitha and Alamelu, 2020), namely participants have perfectionism and lack of self-confidence as well as external factors (Ahulu, Gyasi-Gyamerah and Anum, 2020; Kabiru et al., 2010) such as evaluation and criticism from the audience as well as pressure from teachers and parents.

Meanwhile, although the results of Kılıç’s (2018) study in terms of gender differences were not significant, female students experienced more anxiety than men. This is consistent with the results of several studies that MPA is influenced by genetic factors such as gender (Patston and Osborne 2015; Rae and McCambridge 2004) which are then categorized as internal factors. Significant results of Kılıç’s (2018) research statistical data can be seen in data based on piano ownership. The statistical results show that students who own a piano are less anxious when facing exams than students who do not own a piano. Affective symptoms found in students who do not own a piano are the emergence of a lack of self-confidence and more anxiety. Lack of self-confidence and anxiety in students occurs because the opportunity for students who do not have the piano to practice piano is reduced so that it is possible that they cannot perform optimally and result in their piano exam assessment being not optimal. So, this anxiety occurs due to environmental factors and the existence of an assessment which is then categorized as an external factor (Ahulu, Gyasi-Gyamerah and Anum, 2020; Kabiru et al., 2010). The results of this study also showed that the age of the students did not have a significant effect on the MPA anxiety level on the piano exam. This is in line with the idea that MPA can occur in music players of all ages (Allen, 2011; Boucher and Ryan, 2011). The period of study of students has a significant effect on their MPA level. Fourth year students have the most anxiety and freshmen the least. This is indicated by the affective symptoms that arise, namely anxiety and fear of the future. The MPA can also increase because senior students don’t prepare enough for their piano exams. This symptom occurs due to internal factors, namely senior students’ perceptions of the future and insufficient piano practice of senior students.

Based on the three research results above, pianists tend to feel anxious when other people see their piano playing (Güven, 2015; Kılıç, 2018; Liu, 2016). Why did that happen? The author argues that there are factors that shape the perceptions of the pianist, along with the author’s opinion on this phenomenon. Piano learning generally uses a teacher centered learning approach, where the teacher has a bigger role than students in making attitudes and decisions, for example in choosing piano work and evaluating piano students’ playing.
So that students tend to be passive, only playing the work presented, because they tend to have a small portion in piano learning.

Evaluations that are fully carried out by the teacher also form students’ perceptions that the teacher plays a big role while the students are the opposite so that students often focus on what the teacher thinks? How do teachers view students’ piano playing? not focus on what the students are playing. What’s more, the way teachers deliver learning evaluations to students is an important note. Teacher’s interpersonal skills are needed in building a good communication with students, not only verbal skills but also gestures. Several studies also state that teachers who have good interpersonal skills will increase student motivation, student learning abilities and reduce student anxiety levels (Brok et al., 2005; Brok, Fisher, and Koul, 2005; Terrance, Boak and Conklin, 1975). The teacher’s lack of skill in communicating coupled with the stereotypical expectations of students towards teachers causes students to feel afraid to play the piano wrong when seen by the teacher.

Students’ perceptions on piano lessons generally carry over to the piano performance. Pianists also feel the same way when seen by the audience. The formation of these perceptions causes students to focus more on their thoughts on the perceptions of the audience and causes the students’ concentration in playing the piano to be reduced. This implies that the musical message played by the pianist has not been fully formed by the audience. Therefore, the authors suggest that piano learning be packaged using a student centered educational approach, where students can play an active role in the learning process so that students have a sense of responsibility for the learning process (Scott, Buchanan and Haigh, 1997). With this approach, it is estimated that students can improve their thinking skills, as a result students can think creatively. For example, in the process of selecting piano pieces, students are given the opportunity to choose piano pieces they like with the teacher’s direction. In addition, in the evaluation process, students are given the opportunity to evaluate themselves so that it is estimated that student confidence will grow and student anxiety will decrease.

Conclusion

There are several MPA factors in undergraduates piano majors, namely internal factors such as gender, lack of practice, perfectionist student character and piano students’ perceptions of the audience and the future careers, as well as external factors which include the piano learning process which tends to use a teacher centered approach, lecturer evaluations of performances student piano, audience criticism and room conditions such as lecturers who come in and out of the room when students play the piano, loud piano keys, false piano tunes, lecturers who cough, and the room is hot. On the other hand, the lecturer is one of the factors that can reduce anxiety levels by building student self-confidence, feeling comfortable in the learning process, and perceptions of performance.

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