

Emotional Abuse in Classical Music Education in Finland: A Study of Finnish Women Musicians' Experiences

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Abstract

Based on interviews with fourteen Finnish women classical music students and graduates from Finnish higher music education institutions, this article sheds light on the under-researched subject of emotional abuse in classical music education. *Emotional abuse* is defined as patterned deliberate non-contact behavior, such as verbal abuse and emotional neglect (Stirling and Kerr 2008). In this research, such behavior included maleficent and/or demeaning comments; unwarranted anger; humiliation; harmful comparison; denial of approval, attention, or support; and intentionally setting up a student for failure. First, I ask in what ways beliefs and values specific to classical music culture partly allow for emotional abuse. Second, I explore how the understandings and theories of Gatens (1996/2003) and Tännsjö (2000) can be applied to explain how beliefs, representations, images, symbols, and narratives specific to classical music culture allow for the prevalence of emotional abuse by impacting norms of behavior that may leave individuals prone to both participating in and accepting emotionally abusive behavior.

Keywords

Classical music, emotional abuse, social imaginaries, music education, Moira Gatens, Torbjörn Tännsjö, higher music education, instrumental music education, abuse of power, piano, cello, violin

After the global #MeToo movement, ignited initially by Tarana Burke (2021), sexual harassment in the classical music sector has been widely discussed in the media in Finland (Karemo 2020; Saarikoski 2020a, 2020b, 2020c), other European countries (Aretakis 2018; Brug 2018; Friis Wang and Schou Drivsholm 2020; Gault 2020; Harding 2017; Oetzel and Matel  n.d.; van Oorschot 2018), and in the United States (Cooper 2017). However, in addition to sexual misconduct,¹ other associated abuses of power, especially emotional abuse in classical music education, have also received attention in the media (Baker 2014; Mattila 2020; Midgette and McGlone 2018; Pace 2013, 2015; Saarikoski 2020c; Uniarts Helsinki 2020; Valkama 2020). Ashley Stirling and Gretchen Kerr (2008), researchers on emotional abuse in sport cultures, define *emotional abuse* as “[a] pattern of deliberate non-contact behaviors by a person within a critical relationship role that has the potential to be harmful” (178). Emotional abuse can include “physical behaviours, verbal behaviours, and acts of denying attention and support” (Stirling and Kerr 2008, 178). Emotional abuse (psychological maltreatment) in the forms of verbal abuse and emotional neglect have even been suggested as having been normalized in classical music culture.

In his review of a concert by pianist Andr s Schiff, pianist and professor Matti Raekallio (2020) writes that Schiff had to endure teachers in his childhood whose behavior exemplified “Alice Miller’s [poisonous] pedagogy,”² in which the teacher used “authority to bluntly crush the students”³ (63). Raekallio (2020) asks, “how many potentially significant artists have been destroyed by such a teaching style?” (63). Perhaps a more accurate question would be, how many *persons* have been psycho-physically harmed by such behavior? Similarly, in an interview with the Finnish conductor and professor emeritus Atso Almila, journalist Mattias Mattila (2020) writes that “the culture of humiliating [students] spread from the professional world to the early music education sector. Crying during lessons and shouting in teaching situations are familiar experiences for many Finns” (sec. 5, para. 5). Further, Almila explains that in the “old tradition” of classical music education, “the pupil slowly develops playing skills, but before that, she/he has been slapped on the face and treated as a servant” (Mattila 2020, sec. 3, para. 6).⁴ These accounts suggest some practices of classical music teachers that threaten a student’s psychological well-being have long been a common phenomenon in classical music culture.

This is an especially worrying suggestion considering the consequences that emotional abuse can have, such as low mood, anger, low self-efficacy, loss of self-esteem, poor body image, anxiety, depression, mental health problems,

reduced motivation, impaired focus, and difficulty with skill acquisition (Norman et al. 2012, 22; Stirling and Kerr 2013, 87; Swart 2009, 2013). Further, in their research on long-term consequences of experiences of maltreatment in childhood, Edwards et al. (2003; see also Felitti et al. 1998; Spinazzola et al. 2018) argue that experiencing or witnessing maltreatment in childhood has significant impacts on mental health later in adult life. Experiences of maltreatment in childhood can also impact physical health, as public health researchers Lietzén et al. (2021) show that exposure to adverse childhood experiences increases the risk of asthma in adulthood. The problematic and serious phenomenon of emotional abuse in classical music culture has received attention in the media, but it is still severely under-researched in academia, notwithstanding the work of a few scholars (see Bull 2019; Fernández-Morante 2018; Koivisto-Kaasik forthcoming 2024; Valtasaari 2022; Wickström 2023; Özevin 2022). One of the few researchers who writes about the subject is music historian Nuppu Koivisto-Kaasik (forthcoming 2024) in her research on abuse, violence, and strategies of resistance in nineteenth-century ladies' orchestras. Contributing to a historical contextualization of abuse in classical music spheres, Koivisto-Kaasik discusses psychological dynamics, social hierarchies, and underlying patriarchal power structures of abusive behavior. Focusing on abuse in modern-day classical music culture, sociologist Anna Bull (2019) writes in her research on young musicians playing in a youth orchestra that "emotional abuse was an accepted and normalized part of the culture of classical music education" (190). Bull (2019) further writes that "there is a surprising lack of research exploring the patterns and mechanisms by which abuse occurs in music education" (190), and she associates this with the "denial of the problem within classical music culture more widely" (90).

It is this lack of research that I aim to address in this article. My research is based on fourteen interviews I conducted with Finnish women classical musicians between the ages of 25 and 45. The interviewees described forms of emotionally abusive behavior that resemble those listed by Stirling and Kerr (2009, 230): maleficent and/or demeaning comments, unwarranted anger, humiliation, rejection, denial of approval, attention, or support, as well as harmful comparison, and intentionally setting up a student for failure. I asked in what ways beliefs and values that emerge in classical music culture allow for emotional abuse. The theoretical framework of this paper consists of works by feminist philosopher Moira Gatens (1996/2003, 2004; Churcher and Gatens 2019) and moral philosopher Torbjörn Tännsjö (2000). Gatens (1996/2003, 2004; Churcher and Gatens 2019) uses the notion of *social imaginary* to connect the

ways symbols, narratives, representations, and images are—through emerging values—associated with codes of conduct and normative behavior. Although not relying on the concept of social imaginaries, Tännsjö (2000) similarly suggests how values emerging in sport audiences' admiration of winners impacts the treatment of individuals, especially those not considered as winners. In this article, I attempt to show how these approaches can be used to explain how common practices of classical music culture are associated with the prevalence of emotional abuse in classical music education.

Like the interviewees, I am myself also a classically trained musician. As a pianist and piano teacher, I could be labeled an insider researcher (Juvonen 2017) in this study. However, even though my background and experience have given me insight into the kinds of challenges faced by white Finnish women classical musicians in the classical music scene in Finland, my position is blurred by the many ways I situate myself in relation to gender, race, ethnicity, professional status, and language (Savvides et al. 2014, 413). My position in the “space between” different social statuses has impacted this research in many ways (Corbin Dwyer and Buckle 2009, 2018; Hellawell 2006; Merriam et al. 2001). For example, my background influenced my decisions when choosing the methodological framework of the study in that I studied explicitly musicians that identified as women. However, my social status has undoubtedly had an impact on the research, in that all the participants in this study are likewise *white* women.⁵ Therefore, this article offers only a limited understanding of inequality and emotional abuse in the classical music culture in Finland. Nevertheless, because I position myself also as an activist researcher aiming to shed light on inequalities and problems in classical music culture, this study falls under the category of societal and action-orientated music research. I am hopeful that it will produce new information that can be used to repair inequalities and harmful social phenomena, such as emotional abuse.

Understanding the Social Surroundings of Emotional Abuse

Although research on emotional abuse in classical music education is scarce, the phenomenon is an extensively researched subject in sports science studies on coach-athlete relationships. This relationship bears several similarities to the classical music teacher and student relationship (Burke 2001; Bringer et al. 2002; Fasting and Svela Sand 2015; Kavanagh et al. 2017; Koivisto and Tiihonen 2002; McMahon et al. 2022; Owton and Sparkes 2017; Stirling and Kerr 2008, 2009, 2013, 2017; Tomlinson and Yorganci 1997; Wilinsky and McCabe

2021; Willson and Kerr 2021). Whilst coaches may have power that is based on age and gender hierarchies, plus access to resources, knowledge and expertise, coaches may also have many overlapping roles that contribute to power disparities in relation to the athlete (Stirling and Kerr 2009, 228; Tomlinson and Yorganci 1997). Coaches not only fill the role of experts in specific sports, but they can also act in the roles of dietitian, personal coach, role model, and psychologist in the athletes' lives (Stirling and Kerr 2009, 228).

Similarly, in classical music culture, teachers have important and overlapping roles in students' lives, especially if the students are aiming at professional studies or professional careers in the field. Based on the same interview material, elsewhere (Ramstedt 2023b, forthcoming 2023) I argue that classical music teachers, whom the students mainly see in one-on-one lessons and usually behind closed, soundproofs doors, can become important persons in the students' lives as role models, mentors, experts in music, as well as gatekeepers for career trajectories, and other resources. In this study, interviewees also pointed out that the problematic feature that allows for abuse is generally the hierarchical setting between the teacher as "master" and student as "pupil." However, Stirling and Kerr (2009) write that although power disparities between coach and athlete are often seen as risk factors for emotional abuse, "the coach's degree of power is certainly not the sole determinant of an athlete's vulnerability to abuse" (237). Moreover, they argue that power is also more likely to be used negatively in a sports culture "that often idealizes and prioritizes athletic performance above the best interests or well-being of the athlete" (235). They contend that this is because: the coach's job security and career advancement depend on the athlete's performance; athletes, parents, and their admiration rely on the coach's expertise and power to advance an athlete's career; abusive behavior has become normalized; athletes did not question these behaviors because of the admiration and respect they had for the coach (235). In other words, risk factors include power hierarchies as well as the beliefs and social surroundings of the culture in question.

A way to scrutinize and understand the connection between the assumptions and beliefs that underlie the social surroundings of classical music and the prevalence of emotional abuse is offered by Gatens (1996/2003, 2004), using the concept of the *social imaginary* that she introduces in her book *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* (1996/2003). She uses the notion of the social imaginary in a "loose but nevertheless technical sense" (Gatens 1996/2003, viii) to refer to images, symbols, metaphors, representations, ready-made images, and narratives "that help structure forms of embodied

identity and belonging, social meaning and value, and which, because they appeal to the imaginative faculty, attract strong affective investments” (Gatens 2004, 283). These social imaginaries are plural, and they include gendered, religious, political, sexual, racial, ethnic, moral, national, and international imaginaries that “vary from culture to culture, and even within a single culture” (Gatens 2004, 283). Gatens (2004) argues that the diverse significations that make up social imaginaries “are essential and permanent elements in the creation, maintenance and revisions of the meanings through which cultures makes sense of themselves and offer justification for the variable status and entitlements of their members” (283). In other words, codes of conduct and normative behaviors emerge from a specific culture’s (often unconscious) social imaginaries through the ways they place value or status on different bodies (Gatens 1996/2003, 2004; Churcher and Gatens 2019). Further, the different values and statuses that are inscribed through social imaginaries to different members of any given society “will also affect the social distribution of agency” (Gatens 2004, 283).

Feminist philosopher Millicent Churcher has, together with Gatens (2019), applied the concept of social imaginary to scrutinize ways in which the concept of honor—through associated ideas of sexual entitlement and masculine honor codes—plays a role in normalizing harmful heterosexual encounters. Relatedly, sport and sexual violence researcher Deb Waterhouse-Watson (2009) has drawn upon Gatens’s conception of social imaginaries to explore in what ways discourses of the masculinity and indestructibility of (Australian) footballers’ bodies construct subjectivities that are more prone to commit rape. Similarly, I have elsewhere argued that ideals and idealized performers in classical music culture reflect social imaginaries that reaffirm “restrictive Western beauty standards, thinness, able-bodiedness, and heterosexuality” (Ramstedt 2023a, 98). Further, I have argued that these social imaginaries shaped the way the interviewees “experienced themselves by imposing control on the interrelation of body and mind” (103). In this article, I continue to theorize how the concept of the social imaginary can be used to draw connections between common narratives, symbols, ready-made images, and representations—i.e., social imaginaries—in classical music and the practice of emotional abuse in music education.

To theorize the connection between social imaginaries and codes of conduct, I also rely on Tännsjö (2000), discussing the implications of values that emerge from the interviewees’ experiences. In the book, *Values in Sport: Elitism, Nationalism, Gender Equality, and the Specific Manufacture of Winners*

(2000), Tännsjö writes a provocative chapter about the sport audiences' admiration of winners. He argues that the admiration or idealization of athletic heroes and performances springs from an admiration of strength (13). Further, Tännsjö argues that for "simple phenomenological reasons, we would be *inconsistent* if we did not feel any kind of contempt for the losers, once we sincerely admire the winner" (13). This contempt for weakness, according to him (14), emerges in the treatment of those who are not considered winners. Tännsjö writes that this phenomenon is not exclusive to sport cultures, but can also be found in the sciences and arts (16). Indeed, the admiration of successful performance and "musical perfection," and its impact on classical music education has been discussed by Bull (2019, 2022a, 2022b). She writes about the culture of "getting it right" in classical music education, which she associates with the goal to play with precision and accuracy (2022b). Bull (2022b) maintains that while some people understand the "pedagogy of correction" to be a part of the "classical music game," some people in her study had been negatively affected by it (66). In other words, she suggests that the admiration for successful and correct performance affects the ways individuals in classical music education are treated—implying that not "getting it right" and non-excellence might be met with contempt (Stirling and Kerr 2009, 235; Tännsjö 2000). In effect, I contribute to the discussion of emotional abuse in exploring how—in the connection between the prevalence of emotional abuse and the admiration for success—excellence can be explained by leaning on the concept of social imaginaries (Gatens 1996/2003, 2004; Churcher and Gatens 2019) and the arguments by Tännsjö (2000).

Research Material

The 14 interviews with white Finnish women classical musicians that comprise the research material of this article were conducted between December 2019 and May 2020.⁶ At the time of the interviews, the participants were either students in or graduates from higher classical music education institutions in Finland. All of the interviewees were also working in the field of classical music as teachers and/or musicians. Of the interviews, thirteen were thematically sectioned in-depth interviews (Johnson and Rowlands 2012), and one interview was conducted in written form.⁷ Two of the participants were invited personally, and the rest signed up for the research through an invitation posted on the webpage of activist music research association Suoni⁸ in February 2020, which was also shared in social media. The interviewees were pianists, violinists,

violinists, and cellists. In order to ensure the participants' anonymity, the citations were translated from their original languages (Finnish or Swedish), and none of the citations used in this paper are associated with pseudonyms, interview dates, or other information. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and then thematically divided and analyzed in dialogue with the chosen theoretical framework (Gatens 1996/2003, 2004; Churcher and Gatens 2019; Tännsjö 2000).

The interviewees were not specifically asked about emotional abuse. However, the topic appeared in the interview material in association with research on gender inequality and gendered abuse of power in the classical music culture in Finland (Ramstedt 2023a, 2023b, forthcoming 2023). The participants had an opportunity to grant consent to the use of their interviews for the theme of this article. They were also given the opportunity to read and review the quotes used. The majority of the interviewees mentioned in their interviews behavior that can be defined as emotionally abusive: either something they had experienced themselves in the past or something they had witnessed. Emotionally abusive behavior was described in the interviewees' answers in connection with questions about their musical background and study path from childhood to young adults. It appeared in the interviewees' answers about how they had experienced instrument lessons in their childhood and what kind of relationships they had had with their instrumental teachers. In some cases, they reported emotional abuse in association with teachers' grooming behavior, that is, in preparation for sexual harassment or abuse. In another ongoing study, I discuss the emotional abuse reported in this interview material related to gendered and sexual misconduct, more specifically grooming (Ramstedt forthcoming 2023). However, gender is not a central analytical aspect in this article, but it is analyzed when relevant to the themes that emerge under analysis.

Emotional Abuse in Classical Music Education

Setting the Stage: The Admiration of Musical Excellence

Many of the interviewees⁹ had experienced various forms of emotional abuse by their teachers, ranging from when they were only children to when they were young adults studying professionally. One interviewee explained that "in classical music, it is so that the teacher's ambition is more important [than anything else] ... the child's wellbeing has no meaning whatsoever." Indeed, another interviewee pointed out that "many teachers' self-esteem is based on how their students succeed." Similarly, a third interviewee stated that "it was as if [the

teacher] evaluated people based on how skillful they were [in terms of their playing].” Further, another interviewee exclaimed that “it doesn’t matter if you are an asshole and behave inappropriately and so forth, because your musician-ship may make all of that forgivable.” According to Gatens (2004, 282–83), plural social imaginaries are comprised of symbols, narratives, ready-made images, and representations of a specific culture, and these construct the value and status of its individuals. When leaning on this idea, what emerges from these citations is that musical skills symbolized value; even students’ skills or achievements could be seen as symbolizing value for the teachers.

This connection between skills and value can be seen as also reflecting the common narrative of the genius myth, which dates back to the 18th- and 19th-century propensity to regard artistic “geniuses” as godlike figures (Citron 1993/2000, 201; Moisala 2006, 319). As many scholars have argued, the genius myth is also strongly linked to masculinized categories (Bain 2005, 29; see also Battersby 1989; Koskinen 2006; Parker and Pollock 1981). The Romantic narrative of genius is continuously verified through representation in classical music culture, in that repertoire is still overwhelmingly comprised of musical works by canonized historical white male composers of European descent who are often associated with the narrative of genius (see Battersby 1989; Bonds 2014; Dahlhaus 1989/1990; Goehr 1992; McClary 1991/2002; Moisala 2006; Thurman 2021; Torvinen 2019). This dominance, which reaffirms the Romantic myth of genius, also contributes to a social imaginary that idealizes and prioritizes musical and artistic skills with associated constructions and ideals of gender and race. Tännsjö (2000, 10) argues that “our admiration for the achievements of the great sport heroes, such as athletes who triumph at the Olympic games,” or in this context genius composers, “reflects a fascistoid ideology.” He clarifies in this context that “fascistoid” should be understood as something “tending to or resembling fascism” (23). Furthermore, the celebration of athletic achievements and heroes “springs from the very core of fascist ideology: admiration for strength and contempt for weakness” (10). In this context, the admiration of athletic achievement and strength can be substituted with “musical excellence.” This connection is drawn also by music education researcher Elizabeth Bucura (2020) who writes that “excellence, often considered naturally desirable, tends to communicate *the best*. In other words, anyone who is not the best is less than the best, a lower status. This approach serves to divide people into winners and losers” (10). Further, Tännsjö (2000, 13) writes that admiring and valuing strength also affirms the opposite—i.e., condescension for the “losers.” Perhaps a more salient reasoning between the admiration

of (artistic) excellence/strength/geniusness and the contempt of “losers” can be found in the work of Churcher and Gatens (2019, 154), who suggest it is through social imaginaries that the value and status of bodies are determined, and codes of conduct are created.

Gatens (2004) argues that “social norms link together emotions, imagination, and intellect, that is, they act on and through our embodied selves” (284). Moreover, Gatens (2004) points out that social norms¹⁰ affect individuals as a whole mind and body (285). She discusses this especially from the viewpoint of gender norms or heterosexuality and writes that “it is not primarily *intellectual* discomfort that some people feel when the norms of gender or heterosexuality are transgressed. From the point of view of the norm-endorser, it is often viscerally and acutely felt in the body as disgust, nausea, horror or rage” (285). By applying Gatens’ thoughts, the connection between affective and embodied responses to social imaginaries and the norms that follow them can also be construed in Tännsjö’s (2000) argument: Tännsjö distinguishes three forms of contempt that can be directed at those who are considered comparatively “weak” and less valuable: aggressive, negligent, and paternalistic. What these reactions have in common is that those who are considered “less valuable” are treated without respect (14). The ways the underlying social imaginary of admiring and idealizing skills over well-being can be read within the interviewees’ experience of their teachers’ emotionally abusive behavior.

Associating Musical Skills with a Person’s Worth and Value

Emotionally abusive behavior appeared in the interview material in different forms. Many interviewees reported continuous demeaning behavior through denial of approval, attention, or support, which gave them the feeling of being inadequate. For example, one interviewee explained that her teacher, whom she described as “manipulative and strong,” made her constantly feel that he did not value her. Further, she explained, “I was always a nice and easy student, and he had nothing against me. But he accepted me as a person only when I had good enough technical and musical skills.” Her experience emphasizes the denial of acceptance and support—the way the teacher treated her was based on an underlying social imaginary associating musical skills with an individual’s worth and value. Gatens (2004) writes that acting “contrary to a social norm that is connected to one’s identity may result in one being judged to be a *bad person*” (284). The concept of social norm to which Gatens (2004) refers suggests the “collective expectation about what is to count as appropriate behaviour for a particular identity in a particular context” (284). While she mainly

discusses social norms from the point of view of norms related to gender and sexuality (284), her approach can be understood also in the context of this study. Moreover, the norm seems to be to achieve artistic and musical skills, which spring from social imaginaries that admire artistic excellence and musical “heroes.”

As seen in the citations, how these “goals” were met also impacted how the individual was judged as a person. This connection was clarified by another interviewee describing her experiences as a child and teenager in student orchestras. She stated that “the value of the person was based on their playing skills ... people were pretty much appreciated based on how well they played and how good musicians they would become.” She further elaborated that “children learnt very quickly ... that the [cherished] persons are the good players, and those that aren’t so good are like ‘second class people.’” Further, according to this interviewee, those who were not considered good players in youth orchestras were effectively cast aside and ignored—emotionally neglected—by their teachers. Stirling and Kerr (2009, 235) argue that young athletes may lack the necessary awareness to question abusive behavior if such behavior has already been normalized in the social practices of the sports in which they are involved. While lack of psychological maturity or awareness can contribute to overlooking and not being able to detect emotional abuse, social imaginaries seem to normalize and justify such behavior. In other words, the children learned by observing behavior in which musical skills symbolized value that impacted codes of conduct on how persons were treated (Gatens 2004, 284).

Another form of emotional abuse was that teachers harmfully compared students with each other and thereby indirectly made them feel constantly inadequate. One interviewee explained that her teacher continuously engaged in “silent use of power” and “psychological warfare” by comparing her with other students. Further, just as two other interviewees reported, the teacher compared her harmfully, especially to male students. One interviewee explained that her teacher had “a very nasty way of comparing me to another student.” She felt that “he manipulated me because I’m a girl and I was thin and somehow good-for-nothing. It was a [behavior] that had to do with my gender.” Yet another interviewee said that making the students compete with each other was a “very cruel system” in which the teacher “treated boys differently—nicer.” What emerges from the interview material is not only harmful comparison that made the interviewees feel inadequate and even “good-for-nothing,” but also that the comparison had gendered constructions. Moreover, it seems that the “ready-made image” (Gatens 1996/2003, viii) reflects a (mis)understanding that a

skillful, accomplished, and professional musician is primarily a (white) male. The interviewees' teachers were both women and men, but nevertheless, a gendered prejudice seemed to underpin the way these interviewees were treated.

Some of the emotional abuse that appeared in the interview material took the forms of maleficent commenting, unwarranted anger, blame, and humiliation. One interviewee said that her teacher "always got angry" and was even known to act aggressively by throwing things in the classroom. The interviewee explained that "it was unpleasant. There was such a bad atmosphere." Meanwhile other interviewees reported to have received feedback that criticized them as persons. One interviewee explained that her teacher used to criticize her and give mean comments that were directed to her as a person. For example, when her hands trembled while playing, she was scolded for not practicing hard enough. She explained that "what characterized the [teacher's] pedagogic approach was that I was deficient." She described the cooperation with her teacher as "insufferable." According to an interviewee, a recurring situation was that "in group lessons, the teacher gave really harsh critique so that you almost start to cry, and everyone noticed it ... But no one resolves the situation. And after the lesson, a classmate can come and ask ... 'how is it going?' And [only] then you kind of understand how serious the situation was. Because you are just so used to tolerating [anything]."

Leaning on Gatens' (1996/2003, 35) writings, I have previously discussed how, when "building our own consciousness and self-image, we do it constantly through our interaction with the world outside of ourselves" (Ramstedt 2023a, 102). In the case of gendered and racialized performance ideals and appearance ideals that emerged in the same interview material, I have previously argued that narrow and restrictive social imaginaries impacted how the interviewees saw themselves. However, in the context of this paper, by relying on Gatens (2004, 283; 1996/2003, 35), I drew connections between how the interviewees' experiences of emotional abuse impacted their subjectivity. Many of them experienced, naturally, that emotionally abusive behavior made them feel inadequate, faulty, not good enough, and bad. Moreover, maltreatment and humiliation were so normalized that many of the interviewees were, as one interviewee put it, "used to tolerating anything." The normalization of maltreatment came up in the interview material when many interviewees claimed that they had learned to tolerate enough cruel comments and discouragement "that anyone else would have very likely quit playing [many years ago]." This suggests that some of the interviewees had developed resilience and perseverance to manage within the culture of emotional abuse. However, some had not

questioned emotionally abusive behavior in the early stages of their education or careers.

Justifications and Sustained Harm

One interviewee described her childhood instrumental teacher as follows: “You never knew what she would say, sometimes very cruel [things] ... You never knew in what mood she would be in the lesson. She was one of the most important people in my life, so [her cruel comments] made me cry. I cried during the lessons.” Despite this, the interviewee defended her teacher in various ways: “I don’t blame anyone. I’m so grateful [to her]. She is a remarkable teacher and an amazing [instrumentalist].” Another interviewee explained, “I left almost every lesson crying. He wasn’t cruel. But the standards were so high ... He was also very important to me.” What can be read in these quotes is that achieving the “musical standards” was described as the primary aim. These quotes also accentuate the value that is put upon musical standards or performance. This relates to the quest for excellence (Bucura 2020) and “the pedagogy of correction,” which Bull (2022b) defines as a “teaching practice where the majority of the pedagogic input consists of correction” (66). This was brought up also by many other interviewees. For example, one interviewee in this study explained that a performance of a work “either went right or wrong. If it went wrong, there were long sermons [by the teacher].” Further, another interviewee told me she had continuously felt as if she was not good enough for her teacher because she did not play in a certain, “generally accepted way.” These aims of reaching excellence and imposing musical standards can also be seen as based on “ready-made images” (Gatens 1996/2003, viii) of the quintessential classical musician, and what are considered as “generally accepted ways” of playing. Moreover, based on the same interview material, I argue elsewhere that what is considered success, talent, or skill is also related to specific social categories, as white males are typically seen as easily fitting into these categories¹¹ (Ramstedt 2023a, 99; 2023b, 17). Nevertheless, as Bull (2019) argues, classical music culture’s ideal of “getting it right” has “powerful social effects” (85).

Bucura (2020, 12) points to one such effect when she states that the “focus on the product can even create anxiety around learning and necessary risk-taking.” The quest for excellence has also been connected to the prevalence of musicians’ performance anxiety in the form of “perfectionism” (see McGrath et al. 2017, 20–22). However, the issue of performance anxiety was not mentioned by the interviewees in relation to emotionally abusive behavior. A social effect that did come up was the quest for “getting it right” and putting significant value

on reaching “musical standards”; while the interviewees were clearly hurt by their teachers’ emotionally abusive behavior, they simultaneously were grateful and inclined to defend them. Moreover, the interviewees perceived their own well-being as of secondary importance when suggesting that musical standards justified emotionally abusive behavior. This is also discussed in Bull’s (2019) study, in which it becomes clear that some of the young musicians similarly expressed “gratitude towards their bullying teachers for pushing them really hard” (87), while some of Bull’s interviewees assumed that it was their fault that their teachers had been emotionally abusive. These descriptions clarify the ways in which the underlying narratives of the quest for excellence, musical skills, and excellence symbolize the value of an individual, and the way they contributed to social imaginaries that had “social effects” that construed what behavior and treatment was justifiable and appropriate (Gatens 1996/2003, viii; 2004, 284). As Bull (2019) has astutely observed, the similarities between her interviewees “suggest that this is not about individual teachers so much as an accepted culture of practice within the elite classical music education” (89). Further, the similarities between Bull’s research, conducted in the United Kingdom, and the present study conducted in Finland, suggest that emotional abuse is widely accepted in classical music culture.

The pervasive acceptance of emotional abuse was clearly illustrated by another interviewee, who explained, “even though I was 26–27 years old ... I was still in a bubble. I thought that I would learn only if I am in the humble role of a student.” Her teacher had misused his power by purposefully and consciously setting her up for failure by demanding that she play for a period of time in a way that was physically uncomfortable and harmful, only to later scold her for playing in such a way. However, the interviewee described having defended him to her peers, who had been very critical of his teaching methods. She had not initially recognized this as an abuse of power at all, because, as she explained, there was “a total Stockholm syndrome going on.” In their commentary on sports ethics and abuse, the sports researchers Charles Bachand and Nikki Djak (2018) compare the manner in which a kidnapping victim may begin to empathize with and defend a captor, just as a victim of emotional, psychological, or other abuse may gradually begin to feel loyalty and sentimentality toward the perpetrator. Bachand and Djak (2018) suggest that when young athletes are exposed to prolonged victimization they begin to “accept their treatment as par for the course and, often, even begin to support the controlling coach, justifying his or her actions based on positive athletic results. Such rationalizations of abuse are manifestations of Stockholm syndrome” (178).

Considering Bachand and Djak's (2018) research, it is also important to reflect on how vulnerability was multiplied by the ways power was unequally distributed. Some interviewees stated that a risk factor for abuses of power is the traditional hierarchical master and pupil setting in classical music culture. Moreover, in the classical music classroom, a teacher's structural power, power in the form of social influence, and power over monetary resources and/or career trajectories merge with personal power based on, for example, age and gendered hierarchies. While the interviewees disclosed emotional abuse from both men and women, male teachers also hold power that is based on the gendered hierarchy that privileges men in classical music culture (and society at large). Although gender can be one factor contributing to vulnerability to forms of power abuse, Bull and Page (2021) mention other factors as well, such as disability, age, class, status, and expertise (1065, 1068). In classical music education, one risk factor also may be that teachers often have a significant role in their students' lives, which also came up in the interviews. In many cases, the interviewees described their teachers as very important persons in their lives. For example, one interviewee who had experienced a good and *non-abusive* connection with her teacher compared the role of the teacher to that of a parent.

Indeed, the classical music classroom and education should, as music researcher and teacher Kaj Ahlsved (2018) points out, offer "a safe space where learning occurs, in which the student can laugh, cry, be embarrassed, show vulnerability, and play both right and wrong, together with the teacher"¹² (para. 2). He further states that "the time with the teacher can be the only time in the week where the students get an adult person's full attention" (Ahlsved 2018, para. 2). Music can also play an incredibly important role in an individual's life. As another interviewee explained, becoming a professional musician requires taking music lessons and performing very seriously from a young age; i.e., when "you are vulnerable and naïve." These power discrepancies definitely play a role in making individuals vulnerable for abusive behavior (Stirling and Kerr 2009; Bull and Page 2021). However, I argue that feeling responsible for the teacher's emotionally abusive behavior, or feelings of loyalty and sentimentality towards the emotionally abusive teacher, could also be understood as exemplifying how narratives of genius and musical heroes, ready-made images and expectations of classical music musicians, symbols and the way skills symbolize values and status of persons, as well as emerging social imaginaries that contribute to social norms and codes of conduct, can be internalized by individuals and impact the construction of selves and embodied subjectivities (Gatens 2004, 283–85; 1996/2003, 35).

Gatens (2004) argues, “the social imaginary significantly contributes to the harms and benefits experienced by those whose embodied subjectivities and behaviours are shaped by it” (283). Further, Gatens (2004) writes that “everyday normative relations” can come to “embody aspects of the broader imaginary through the internalization of what is to count as appropriate behaviour for particular types of identity. The associated emotions of guilt, shame, and so on, in the face of norm transgression, become the embodied signs of one’s belonging to this or that group, society or culture” (286). In the context of this research, the acceptance of emotionally abusive behavior, as well as shame, guilt, and inadequacy about not achieving the requirements reflected in the social imaginaries, can be understood as reflecting the ways in which both social imaginaries and “contempt” for inadequacy (Tännsjö 2000) are embodied. Acceptance of emotionally abusive behavior can be understood as a sign of belonging to the classical music culture in Finland (Gatens 2004, 286). Nevertheless, experiences of emotional abuse impacted the participants’ feelings and experiences of self-sufficiency and self-confidence. One interviewee told me that “it felt demeaning, and I was suffering mentally,” while another interviewee stated that “it had a very long-term effect on my self-esteem.” Yet another interviewee associated emotionally abusive behavior with “psycho-somatic effects:” “My fingers broke [in an accident] ... but then I was so happy that I didn’t have to go to the lessons.”

Conclusion

In this paper, I have provided examples of the ways emotional abuse appears in classical music education in Finland. Interviewees’ experiences of emotional abuse occurred at different times in their lives, ranging from childhood stages of music education to adult studies aiming at professional careers. Experiences of emotional abuse ranged from maleficent and/or demeaning comments, unwarranted anger, blame, humiliation, harmful comparison, rejection, and denial of approval, attention, or support, to intentionally being set up for failure. While vulnerability can be explained according to different accounts of power imbalance, I have particularly focused on how Gatens’ theory (1996/2003, 2004; Churcher and Gatens 2019) can be used to clarify how the narratives, symbols, norms, representations, and ready-made images specific to classical music culture create norms that drive social actors. Furthermore, I have analyzed themes that arose in the interviews to show how they, together, reveal social imaginaries.

The themes that arose were, first, the narrative regarding artistic “geniuses” as godlike figures and idealizing of musical “excellence” and artistic skills above all things. As I have demonstrated, this idealization and admiration of the romantic myth of genius is continuously affirmed in the repertoire and practices of classical music, as well as in the ready-made image of an accomplished and skillful classical musician. Repertoire as well as the ready-made image of a classical musician reflect gendered and racialized constructions, showing that the idealization of geniuses and skills also reflects values in which gender and race play a role. The second theme that arose showed how the narratives and representations of musical skills, excellence, and artistic accomplishment and success may symbolize the value and status of persons. These narratives, representations, ready-made images, and symbols were related to the third theme that emerged in the interviews: a musician’s skill level determines how they may be accepted and appreciated, or not, as a person.

As Tännsjö (2000, 22) points out, admiration for excellence and musical heroes can be traced back to an admiration of strength and “winners,” which he interprets as also affirming the opposite—contempt for “losers.” Tännsjö’s (2000) argument can also be understood as affirming Gatens’ (2004) understanding of social imaginaries as conveying the value of persons, as they contribute to (harmful) social norms and practices that impact codes of conduct and determine what is “appropriate” treatment for individuals. Gatens (2004, 285) writes that social imaginaries and social norms “engage the whole person—reason and imagination, rationality and affect, mind and body.” Thereby, Gatens’ (1996/2003, 2004; Churcher and Gatens 2019) and Tännsjö’s (2000) ideas may help to explain in what ways emotional abuse may be justified and normalized through a social imaginary that prioritizes and idealizes musical targets and musical accomplishments over the well-being and welfare of the student (Stirling and Kerr 2009, 235). Following the writings of Gatens (2004) and Tännsjö (2000), I argue that emotions such as shame and guilt, as well as acceptance of emotionally abusive behavior, reflect how codes of conduct, shaped by the afore-mentioned social imaginaries, can become embodied and internalized. Further, emotional abuse was partly normalized, in the sense that some of the interviewees even felt themselves to be responsible or deserving of such behavior.

These findings indicate that there is a burning need for more research on emotional abuse in the context of classical music culture. Moreover, the result of this study shows that changes are needed in classical music education in order to prevent emotional abuse. Based on the findings in this article, I propose

that in classical music instrumental education, emphasis should be placed on students' holistic musical development and well-being, rather than on excellence, performance, and outcome (Bucura 2020; Bull and Page 2021; Edgar 2014; Jääskeläinen et al. 2023; Stirling and Kerr 2009, 235; Wickström 2023). As Bucura (2020) points out, "responsible music teaching focuses on the long-term sustainability of a uniquely realized, personal musicianship among all students" (15). Demanding a responsible, positive, and affirmative pedagogical focus on students' holistic musical development requires taking such a focus in training future instrumental teachers, as well as offering opportunities for current classical music instrumental teachers to continually develop their pedagogical skills (Bowles and O'Dwyer 2020; Casas-Mas and López-Íñiguez 2022; Edgar 2014; Jääskeläinen et al. 2023, 17; Thompson-Bell 2022, 3; Wickström 2023, 60). Offering teachers career support or supervision is one way in which they could be encouraged to continuously develop their psychological and social skills (Valtasaari 2022). Teachers' engagement in self-reflection and introspection about their musical backgrounds may also prevent them from reproducing and continuing harmful patterns, practices, and norms to which they themselves might have been subjected.

On the other hand, both higher music education students' dependence on their instrumental teachers and instrumental teachers' power could be lessened by including other partners and professionals to support students' development, such as performance coaches, discipline-specific counseling, and support to deal with psycho-physical issues (Jääskeläinen et al. 2023, 16; Stirling and Kerr 2009). In children's classical music instrumental education, teachers' power could be balanced by involving parents to support their child's musical development. However, as has been pointed out in sports research: "concerns have been expressed regarding the neo-liberal orientation that some parents have towards their child's success" (Everley 2020, 116). As a researcher on abuse in sports, Suzanne Everley (2020) points out that potentially "even those most responsible for children may prioritise 'success' above welfare" (116). Indeed, a change in a focus from a performance-orientated teaching style to a focus on students' well-being and holistic musical development also requires awareness of how the surrounding culture may impose harmful beliefs. Stirling and Kerr (2009) suggest that emotional abuse could be prevented "by creating awareness among athletes that performance excellence does not need to come at the cost of personal well-being" (235; see also Bull et al. 2023; Wickström 2023, 62). In other words, prevention of emotional abuse needs to take place not only in classrooms but also more broadly on an institutional and cultural

level by advancing awareness and encouraging critical consideration of how power hierarchies, practices, repertoires, narratives, representations, and symbols in classical music culture may contribute to harmful social norms. Moreover, institutions should make a clear stance of zero tolerance against emotional abuse while providing information to students and staff on the harms of abusive behaviors. The consequences of allowing the issue to remain unaddressed leaves individuals at risk of the long-term, harmful, and devastating effects that emotional abuse can have on their mental and physical well-being.

About the Author

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Notes

- ¹ The words *sexual misconduct* refers to a wide range of behavior, such as harassment, grooming, and sexualized communication (Page et al. 2019).
- ² Raekallio mentions psychologist and researcher Alice Miller’s (1987) research on abusive pedagogy, which she refers to as “poisonous pedagogy.”
- ³ The citations have been translated from Finnish to English by the writer.
- ⁴ The citations have been translated from Finnish to English by the writer.
- ⁵ See Kivinen and Ramstedt (forthcoming 2024) for a detailed discussion about positionality. In the article, music historian Marika Kivinen and I discuss and problematize positionality and embodied experience in our work as trained classical musicians and white women doing research on music, gender, and racialisation in a Finnish context.
- ⁶ In order to protect participants’ anonymity, quotes used in this article are not associated with specific dates of interviews.

- Interviewee 1. Interview in person by author in Helsinki. 29.11.2019.
 Interviewee 2. Interview in person by author in Helsinki. 13.12.2019.
 Interviewee 3. Interview in person by author in Helsinki. 6.3.2020.
 Interviewee 4. Interview in person by author in Helsinki. 7.3.2020.
 Interviewee 5. Interview in person by author in Helsinki. 8.3.2020.
 Interviewee 6. Interview in videocall by author. 1.4.2020.
 Interviewee 7. Interview in videocall by author. 2.4.2020.
 Interviewee 8. Interview in videocall by author. 3.4.2020.
 Interviewee 9. Interview in videocall by author. 7.4.2020.
 Interviewee 10. Interview in videocall by author. 9.4.2020.
 Interviewee 11. Interview in videocall by author. 14.4.2020.
 Interviewee 12. Interview in videocall by author. 15.4.2020.
 Interviewee 13. Interview in videocall by author. 15.4.2020.
 Interviewee 14. Interview in writing by author. 21.5.2020.

All the interviews are stored in both audio and text format in the University of Helsinki's storage cloud and on the researcher's own computer. In accordance with the wishes of participants, some of the interview material will be destroyed after the completion of the research, while other parts of it will be preserved in a chosen archive.

⁷ One interviewee wished to participate in the research in writing so as not to relive traumatic experiences.

⁸ *Suoni* is a Finnish research association that practices societally activist music research. The invitation to participate in this research was published on the website <https://www.suoni.fi/etusivu/2020/2/20/osallistu-tutkimukseen-sukupuolittuneesta-vallankytst-klassisen-musiikin-kulttuurissa>.

⁹ From this point onward, I use the word “interviewees” to refer to participants in this research who were introduced in earlier sections.

¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion about the connection between social norms and social imaginaries, see the subchapter, “Social Imaginaries and Embodied Norms” (Gatens 2004, 284–88).

¹¹ For a discussion on how gender ideals intersect with race in this interview material, see Ramstedt (2023a, 2023b).

¹² These citations were translated from Swedish to English by the author.

¹³ This work was supported by The Finnish Cultural Foundation [Suomen Kulttuuri-rahasto].