

## The effects of sensitivity to criticism on motivation and performance in music students

Gordon D. Atlas, Terry Taggart and Debra J. Goodell

Atlas@Alfred.edu

*Music education inherently relies on a process of providing and receiving critical feedback. Students who are very sensitive to criticism, however, may present a unique challenge for the music educator. This study investigated the ways in which sensitivity to criticism affects the educational experience of music students. Nineteen students were assessed for sensitivity to criticism, self-reported motivation, and perceived quality of performance early and late in the semester. High scores on the Sensitivity to Criticism Scale (Atlas, 1994) were associated with decreases in ratings of importance of the activity and mildly connected with decreases in enjoyment and confidence levels. Highly sensitive students were more hurt by their instructors' criticisms, felt they improved less in response to criticism, and found it more difficult to communicate with the instructor following criticism. These results suggest that being sensitive to criticism can have an impact on music students' motivation and performance – and that instructors should be particularly careful in considering the effects that critical feedback may have on highly sensitive students.*

Music educators are in a fairly unique position with regard to the administering of feedback to their students. They are required to give nearly constant feedback in order to provide students with information about the quality of their musical performance – but they also wish to inspire rather than discourage their students. What is the most effective way to deliver positive or negative feedback? How, especially, should they approach the very sensitive student who may shrink from any negative feedback? Music educators have likely been aware of the difficulties of dealing with the 'sensitive student', but, thus far, the research literature has not sufficiently focused on students who may be particularly sensitive to feedback or criticism.

The literature on the personality of music performers has provided some hints that musicians may be a particularly sensitive group. Some early research suggests, in fact, that students receiving professional music education are prone to higher levels of anxiety than less devoted musical performers (Shatin, Kotter & Longmore, 1968). As musicians become more proficient, moreover, they appear to develop more introverted tendencies, exposing them to increased possibilities of hypersensitivity to stress-related stimulation, which may compromise their capacity to perform before audiences (Kemp, 1996). Researchers of music performers have also postulated that music students have tendencies towards being highly competitive, maintain high self-standards, show tendencies towards low self-esteem and high anxiety, and often harbour feelings of envy towards other musicians (Kemp, 1996; Wills & Cooper, 1988). Identifying some of the characteristics of sensitive students and the obstacles they may face can be helpful to the music educator in providing the opportunity to address more completely those students' needs.

Another area of research that has been undertaken regarding responses of music students to performance feedback is the domain of performance anxiety (Abel & Larkin, 1990; Brotons, 1994; Nagel, Himle & Papsdorf, 1989; Sinden, 1999; Steptoe, 1989). Specifically, performance anxiety seems to be connected with reduced levels of enjoyment experienced by amateur and professional musicians (Steptoe, 1982). Social anxiety also seems to play a large role in students' self-perceptions of their ability in the music domain; one study found that students' levels of social anxiety influenced how they perceived the quality of their own singing voice (Lundh *et al.*, 2002). The nature of the audience has also been found to have a significant effect on levels of performance anxiety (LeBlanc *et al.*, 1997), suggesting that students respond strongly to the setting in which they learn and perform.

It has been demonstrated that students' thoughts and feelings about the lesson greatly affect learning and the level of enjoyment of the experience (Mackworth-Young, 1990). A positive learning experience, in the Mackworth-Young study, was related to increased enjoyment and improved student–teacher relationships. More recent research (Pitts, 2002) suggests that music educational experience has even broader implications for students in terms of the development of their perceptions about themselves, peer comparisons, and their self-identity. Survey research has provided evidence that music students, perhaps more than other groups, have difficulty separating themselves from their work (Dews & Williams, 1989). Early work by Brandstetter (1944) found that those students who enjoyed musical activities which were not evaluated prior to formal music study were potentially better able to separate performance and self-esteem cognitively – leading to less emphasis on criticism and increased enjoyment.

What is sensitivity to criticism? In recent work by Atlas (1994), sensitivity is defined by the presence of two characteristics: (1) a tendency to perceive even innocuous comments as critical – a lowered threshold for critical feedback, and (2) a tendency to be more emotionally responsive or hurt by negative feedback. These two forms of sensitivity (perceptual and emotional) are themselves highly correlated and additively produce a total score on the Sensitivity to Criticism Scale. Sensitivity to criticism, moreover, has been found to correlate positively with neuroticism (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1964), fear of negative evaluation (Watson & Friend, 1969) and repression-sensitisation (Byrne, 1961); see Table 1 for a summary of these correlations with other personality variables.

As noted by Dews & Williams (1989), additional research is needed on the personality of the music student, the student–teacher relationship, and other subtle factors influencing performance. More specifically, if students are prone to take criticism very personally, perhaps this may have a deleterious effect on their music education. One study demonstrated that children of 'performance goal parents' were more concerned about mistakes, expressed doubts about actions, and were more concerned with parental criticism, whereas children of 'learning goal parents' showed less dysfunctional perfectionism (Ablard & Parker, 1997). Another study suggests that the music educator's emotional sensitivity plays a large part in the effectiveness of their teaching (Hamann, Lineburgh & Paul, 1998). It stands to reason that if music educators are more aware of and sensitive to the nature of the personality of their students, they are more likely to be successful in providing a positive educational experience for their students.

We studied one important aspect of students' personality – the degree to which they are sensitive to criticism. Specifically, we examined some ways in which sensitivity to

Table 1 *Correlations between Sensitivity to Criticism and other personality measures (from Atlas, 1994)*

Trait	Sensitivity to Criticism
Rosenberg self-esteem	-.36*
Extraversion	-.22
Neuroticism	.65***
Pessimistic explanatory style	.37**
Locus of control	.16
Fear of negative evaluation	.49**
Repression-sensitisation	.55**
Social desirability	-.30*

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$

criticism may affect motivation and performance in music students. Our hypotheses were that high levels of sensitivity to criticism would be related to lower levels (over the course of the semester) of (1) enjoyment of the activity, (2) perceived importance of the skills involved, and (3) perceived quality of the student–teacher interaction. In order to test these hypotheses, we studied music students over the course of a college semester.

### Method

Nineteen undergraduate students were recruited from Music Performance classes at a small liberal arts college. During the first two weeks of the semester, participants were assessed on the Sensitivity to Criticism Scale (Atlas, 1994) and also completed a self-report questionnaire designed for this study which measured level of skill and current motivation towards music performance. During the last three weeks of the semester, participants were retested on these motivational and performance variables.

The Sensitivity to Criticism Scale (STCS) presents participants with hypothetical situations (see Table 2 for sample items) which may be perceived as criticisms and asks to what extent they would (a) view the situation as a criticism and (b) be hurt by the situation.

### Results

Correlational analyses were performed between Sensitivity to Criticism scores and self-ratings of motivation and performance at the end of the semester. Partial correlations were used to control for initial levels of these variables. Table 3 presents the results.

High scores on the STCS were associated with a diminished perceived importance of the skill ( $r = -.65$ ,  $p < .01$ ) at the end of the semester. A trend could also be detected in which Sensitivity to Criticism was related to lowered enjoyment ( $r = -.32$ ,  $p < .15$ ) and a decreased confidence level ( $r = -.34$ ,  $p < .13$ ). Hope for achievement and expectation for achievement were unrelated to Sensitivity to Criticism levels.

An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to test the hypothesis that Sensitivity to Criticism affected the quality of the perceived student–teacher interaction. A median split

Table 2 *Examples of situations on the Sensitivity to Criticism Scale*

*A friend says:*

1. 'You look like you didn't get any sleep last night.'
2. 'It's really hard to keep one's weight down, isn't it?'
3. 'You sure made a fool of yourself last night.'
4. 'Is that the way you wanted your hair to look?'
5. 'You are a real jerk.'
6. 'Have you noticed that your friends tend to be losers?'
7. 'Have you considered seeing a counsellor?'

*Consider the following situations:*

1. You are not invited to a party, given by a mutual friend, that all of your other friends have been invited to.
2. Your boss tells you this may not be the right job for you.
3. You have four tickets to the Billy Joel concert and none of your friends will go with you.
4. You're a pre-med, and your biology professor suggests you consider nursing.
5. Your coach tells you to increase your practice time.

Table 3 *Correlations between Sensitivity to Criticism and self-ratings of motivation and performance at end of semester, controlling for initial levels*

Motivation and performance variables	Sensitivity to Criticism
Self-reported skill level	.28
Confidence	-.34
Enjoyment of activity	-.32
Importance of activity	-.65**
Expectation for achievement	-.02
Hope for achievement	.12

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$

was used to separate those high on the STCS from those with low scores on the STCS. Table 4 shows the results.

Highly sensitive and low-sensitive participants did not differ regarding their perception of the nature and frequency of evaluation received. Sensitive participants, however, exhibited a pattern in which they were (a) hurt more by the instructor's criticism, (b) felt they improved *less* in response to criticism, and (c) found it more difficult to communicate with the instructor following criticism.

## Discussion

The results of this study indicate that there may be significant consequences of high levels of Sensitivity to Criticism for music students. High scores on the STCS were associated

Table 4 Comparisons between highly sensitive subjects and low-sensitive subjects on responses to instructor

	Low sensitivity	High sensitivity
Instructor is objective in evaluation	6.50	5.57
Instructor frequently criticises students' work	5.33	4.86
Instructor frequently criticises my work	4.00	3.43
Feels hurt when criticised	1.50	3.86*
Criticism helps me to improve my work	5.67	4.00*
Criticism makes communication more difficult	1.17	3.43**

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$

with lower ratings of the importance of the activity and with a slight decline in levels of enjoyment and confidence. This suggests that high levels of sensitivity may have an impact on the learning experience. It is likely that this drop in motivation that sensitive students experience may lead to performance decrements or withdrawal from the activity.

The ratings of student–teacher interactions revealed that, although highly sensitive participants do not appear to distort reality regarding frequency of evaluation, they are more emotionally affected by the criticism they receive. These results suggest that teachers should be particularly attuned to the needs of students who may respond more emotionally to criticism. In general, research tends to indicate that the use of positive reinforcement is more effective than punishment – and this may be particularly true for those students who are highly sensitive to criticism.

A limitation of this study is the small number of participants. The fact that significant findings were nonetheless observed supports the premise that high levels of sensitivity to criticism may, in fact, interfere with optimal academic achievement. Of course, the current study provides evidence of diminished self-ratings of performance levels (for sensitive students) rather than employing objective measures of achievement. Future research should explore the link between sensitivity to criticism and formal assessments of performance.

Our data are also limited in that they do not provide a fine-grained analysis of the student–teacher interaction that takes place inside and outside the classroom. We cannot be sure which types of critical remarks, for example, led to our participants feeling dejected and finding themselves less motivated to play their instruments. Subtle differences both in the content and in the process of providing feedback undoubtedly play an important role in the responses of students.

Further research could potentially cast light on many of the processes involved in the way sensitive music students respond to critical feedback. What is the connection, for example, between performance anxiety and sensitivity to criticism: are students who are sensitive to criticism also highly anxious in performing? Also, what is the typical profile of the music student who is sensitive to criticism: shy, withdrawn and quiet or confrontational and rebellious?

Even more importantly, how can we as music educators be more effective in reaching the sensitive students in our classes? Several suggestions should be considered:

(1) recognising motivational changes in music students as early as possible would be particularly important so that appropriate support can be provided; (2) educational or clinical programmes can be designed to help students separate performance feedback from self-esteem: the goal here is to help the student recognise they are not being *personally* criticised – only their performance is being evaluated; and (3) provide a great deal of positive reinforcement and constructive, rather than destructive, criticism for these students. For the music educator, identifying the ‘sensitive student’ and providing as much encouragement as possible may represent a beginning in providing an effective environment in which that student can thrive.

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