Music and the Ego Death

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Abstract

This paper will explore the relationship between the ego that manifests early in our lives and the creative work that is impacted by toxic habits. The first half of this paper explains in detail what the ego is and how it is created in childhood, and how unawareness of the ego impacts us until our death. Topics such as shame, guilt and performance anxiety are scrutinized for the underlying meaning of such habits. The research includes scientific studies as well as literature to define the ego.The second half will explain how to create music in spite of the ego and understanding why our habits prevent us from being our authentic selves. Topics such as music creation, mastery and idealization are all discussed in detail. While this paper is mainly focused on composition, the ideas apply to any aspect of a musicians life, such as practice or performing. As well as a psychological component, theological and Christian viewpoints are considered in examining the ego.

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So much of a musician's work can feel like it was by chance. Without properly understanding the underlying psychology that is continually at work, one can feel lost and confused as to why certain events transpire in the ways that they do. One of these mysteries can simply be reduced to one word: ego. The standard definition of "someone with a big ego" would typically point out a larger than life personality that doesn't mind stepping on others to get what they want. However, this is a very small portion of what the ego entails. Prototypical behavior in today's society (usually negative) can all be traced back to the ego's selfish desire. Suffice to say that ego is a hindering roadblock that every creative must encounter and deal with when creating music. Without the awareness of what is actually in one's way, though, it is easy to continually be bumping into the same problems over and over again in trying to accomplish major goals. To maximize one's creative potential in the eyes of the Lord, the musician must be aware of these obstacles and destroy the ego in favor of truth and beauty.

This paper will explore how the ego is created early in life and the damaging behaviors that result when the ego protects itself. Since egoistic predispositions are prominent in the creative work of the artist, the musician must be self-aware of this interference and actively root out toxic habits. The first half will identify what the ego is and how it ruins creative efforts, while the second half will deal with making music in spite of the ego. While the majority of the paper is focused on a psychological aspect, this paper will also cover a theological component and how it relates to Christian faith. Towards the end topics such as talent and the "Resistance" musicians face daily will be discussed and how music is affected by the ego's work in our lives.

The first step in destroying our egotistical behavior is to simply define what it is. Gertrude Blanck states that, "…the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego, thereby including the

physical self and the endopsychic representations of self and object."[1] While created entirely within the mind, the ego affects our physical bodies and behaviors manifest as a result. The fabrication of our self-worth in our minds makes one susceptible to harmful proclivities. Ego, at its most fundamental and foundational, is a constructed barrier that hinders the individual from seeing an objective reality. What actually *is* and real in today's world does not always align with how our egos see it. This disconnect is the primary source of destructive human tendencies, which include but are not limited to jealousy, envy, procrastination, comparison and perfectionism. Within all of these modes of egotistical thinking arise hindering emotions such as shame, fear and inadequacy. Hans W. Loewald remarks that, "This conception of the relationship between ego and reality presupposes a fundamental antagonism which has to be bridged or overcome otherwise in order to make life in this reality possible."[2] Without delving deep into one's self and dissolving the separation between ego and reality, there will be a host of problems internally and externally in one's life. Loewald goes on to state that, "[the ego] is a mediator between the outer and inner world…an organizing agency…the predominant function of the ego is a defensive one not only against reality but also against the inner world…which disregards reality."[3] To protect the individual from further harm, the ego is created to mediate and filter certain aspects of reality so as not to tarnish our self-image. So, to redefine: someone with a big ego can be described as an individual with a large disconnect from his internal state of being and the reality he lives in. Without comprehending the realness of the world around him, he is constantly being

[1] Gertrude Blanck & Rubin Blanck, *Ego Psychology:Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 85.
[2] Hans W. Loewald, "Ego and Reality." *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 32 (Jan 1, 1951), 10.
[3] *Ibid.*

presented with the same issues in creation. This is a large part of the creative struggle, and why it seems so mystical and mysterious.

To separate us from the world, the ego constructs a self-image of what one thinks he looks like to everyone else. This strictly mental façade obscures our vision and fools us into thinking we are something we are not. However, some early clues arise that we may not be who we think we are. If one gives a rousing speech (in his mind) full of passion and charisma and expects thunderous applause at the conclusion, this person would be sorely disappointed and bitter if he does not get what he thinks he deserves. There is an obvious disconnect between what he thinks he is and how the world really sees him. The destructive and self-centered nature of egotistical behavior is only concerned with self preservation to the detriment of other facets of life. In the example above, the sensible action to take would be to dissect why a disconnect exists and how he could remedy it. Maybe he could get feedback from family and friends or attend a public speaking class to figure out why he isn't getting the reaction he visualizes; these would all be valuable steps in aligning himself with the reality around him.

However, the ego does not easily permit rational behavior. Instead it would be open to blame, criticize, or otherwise further distance itself from reality in order to preserve a polished and flawless self-image. The ego hates criticism, and will do anything and everything to prevent the trophy self image from being tarnished. Elizabeth Wright states, "In particular the ego is concerned with self-preservation…this is viewed as a struggle between the 'reality principle and the 'pleasure principle', in which the body has to learn to postpone pleasure and accept a degree of unpleasure in order to comply with social demands."[4] It separates the self and reality in order to

[4] Elizabeth Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism: A Reappraisal* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 1998), 10.

get its way. The speaker, if consumed by egoistic thinking, would eventually come to the conclusion that the audience is to blame and to further pat himself on the back for a job well done. Notice here the ignorance and intentional refusal to acknowledge strict facts and instead to attribute negativity to others. Ego has ruined the potential for the speaker to improve on his craft.

The ego disorients the individual by judging and casting value on objects and people in reality that simply exist. According to the ego, to judge anything as "good" or "bad" is to judge if it is "good" or "bad" for our *self-image.* Jacques Lacan states that, "What we have been able to observe is the privileged way in which a person expresses himself as the ego; it is precisely this—*Verneinung*, or denial."[5] Instead of accurately assessing objective truths, we deny to protect our egos. Criticism usually has the strongest emotional reaction when rubbed against the ego. There are, of course, those spiteful and malicious critics with their own ego problems that may tear us down without reason, but usually any sort of critique aimed at us or our work can be constructive. It is there to simply help, not injure. However, the ego mistakenly perceives any sort of criticism as "bad" since it maims the carefully constructed *self-image* that we perpetuate. Instead of allowing the criticism to be used in a helpful way, the ego simply discards it. When one is not learning, one is dying. Conflict and interactions with others' ideals is a necessity in human life to expand our own world views. Gertrude Blanck recalls a story of a man in therapy who is ignorant of his family's needs, which harbors frustration and resentment within the marriage: "This introduces a demand on his ego to try to understand his own behavior better, without

[5] Jacques Lacan, "Some Reflections on the Ego." *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 34 (Jan 1, 1953): 11.

the criticism implicit in confrontation. It is a first step toward possibly finding the unremembera-ble pattern that influences his present behavior."[6] It is all too easy to simply ignore obvious signs of our wrongdoing and instead view the world through our own subjective lens. The ego will dis-miss any opposition to carefully constructed thoughts or morals one has instilled early in life. In this way, the ego makes us close minded.

With this diminished capacity to learn and grow, it is easy to see why so many people desperately want to better themselves, yet run into all sorts of hindrances from the start. The ego does not want to become better, it wants to be static. It doesn't want to be pushed, challenged or otherwise tested. It simply wants to be comfortable doing whatever is easy. And this is the reason why so many try and fail to self-improve: the ego has erected defenses to make absolutely sure that this individual stays right where he has always been. According to Anna Freud, defenses "describe the ego's struggle against painful or unendurable ideas or affects."[7] With the excite-ment of growth also comes the potential for disappointment; with the rush of victory can also come the feeling of bitter failure. Herman Nunberg ruminates that, "…the ego is strong or weak according to the quantities of energy developed by the instincts, in short, that *the strength or weakness of ego depends on the instincts*."[8] One of the most ingrained and subconscious instincts in the human psyche is fear. Fear, when observed correctly, protects us from imminent danger and impending death. However, this instinct (when paired with the ego) has evolved to make us

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[6] Gertrude Blanck & Rubin Blanck, *Ego Psychology:Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 228.
[7] Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (Madison: International Universities Press, 1979), 42.
[8] Herman Nunberg, "Ego Strength and Ego Weakness." *American Imago; a Psychoanalytic Journal for the Arts and Sciences* 3.3 (Aug 1, 1942): 25.

fear anything that runs counter to the self image we have constructed.[9] If one wants to climb Everest, the lingering feeling of doom and crushing jaws of death are always one missed step away. So instead of reaching the top, the ego is simply content in sitting at the base of the mountain; no risk is equivalent to no harm. One of the more detrimental beliefs that the ego instills in our minds is: "*You can't handle failure."* Of course, this is untrue: even if we do fail, we adapt. Physical danger is always a reality, but we will not die from being rejected. However, the ego equates "flawed self-image" with literal death. Thus, it keeps itself alive through illogical beliefs such as the one above. The human condition, however, entails adventure and exploration. Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition* states that, "The task and potential greatness of mortals lie in their ability to produce things—words and deeds and worlds—which would deserve to be and, at least to a degree, are at home in everlastingness that through them mortals could find their place in a cosmos where everything is immortal except themselves."[10] It is not within our human nature to simply sit idly by and let life pass us. Our responsibility in this world is to make the most of it so that something of value might inspire others.

One of the more frustrating aspects of the ego is that we continue to let it proliferate, even though it is simply an illusion constructed by our minds to defend us from hurting ourselves. This illusion is mainly created and sustained through deep emotional wounds we have suffered in childhood, and we continually rub against these wounds every time a situation correlates with the trauma we have experienced in the past.[11] One of the greatest enemies of creative work is that of shame, which the ego loves. Perfectionism, comparison, and jealousy are all rooted in a deep

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[9] Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (Madison: International Universities Press, 1979), 59.
[10] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998), 26.
[11] Paul Gilbert & Bernice Andrews, *Shame: Interpersonal Behavior, Psychopathology, and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 176.

seated shame. Helen Block Lewis defines shame as being directly about the self and all of the evaluations we make about ourselves, while guilt is simply a connection between us and the wrongdoing. To put it simply, shame says, "*I am inherently bad",* while guilt says "*I did a bad thing."*[12] So why is shame such a powerful tool at our ego's disposal? If we believe we are inherently bad (that we were born bad and nothing could cure us), this is a natural hindrance to our self-esteem and how we perceive ourselves. Studies have shown that people with low self-esteem generally have poor coping skills and are otherwise less productive and influential than their counterparts with a high sense of self.[13] People with low self esteem also tend to exhibit traits that inhibit creative work, such as depression and insecurity.[14] So then we arrive at the vicious cycle: we actively resist anything that could potentially wound us, as the damage will uncover the shame we so desperately want to hide. This is where our egos were created, and why there is a disconnect between us and reality: it is easier to deny the truth than accept it and move on. The ego then proliferates and encourages harmful defenses, thus resending the signal that we were bad all along when something harmful comes our way. To dissolve the ego, we must heal ourselves from feeling shameful about who we are. A large part of this healing process for the Christian comes from acceptance, and the realization that nothing we can do makes us less or more worthy in the eyes of God.

According to Joseph Burgo, a psychotherapist specializing in defense mechanisms, "Of all the painful emotions humans must bear, a core sense of shame is the most excruciating, the

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[12] Jacqueline Steiner, "Understanding the Behavioral Responses Corresponding with the Emotions Guilt and Shame", *Carnegie Mellon University Research Showcase* (April 2009): 5.
[13] Roy F. Baumeister, Brad J. Bushman & W. Keith Campbell, "Self-Esteem, Narcissism, and Aggression: Does Violence Result From Low Self-Esteem or From Threatened Egotism?" *Current Directions in Psychological Science* vol. 9 no. 1 (February 2000): 26-29.
[14] *Ibid.*

most difficult to bear."[15] A large part of this pain comes from the fact that shame is directly tied to our vulnerability and how vulnerable we make ourselves to the world. To clarify, vulnerability is not weakness. It is simply the state of being in which our authentic selves can be present to those around us, instead of covering up our perceived flaws through defense mechanisms such as blaming and self-sabotage. It is established that the ego is separate from reality and the objective facts that surround our daily lives. What better way to distort the vision of our existence than to run away into fantasy? To escape the present (as in, not living in the "now"), the ego puts an intense focus on the past and future. It does this by visualizing and fantasizing about "how things should have been" (the past) or "how things will be once I have x, y, and z" (the future).[16] Both are directly caused by the ego not accepting the present reality. Instead of dealing with the shame that exists in the present, it escapes into fantastical thinking. Burgo goes on to state that, "At heart, the experience of basic shame, often unconscious, feels like inner ugliness, the conviction that if others were truly to 'see' us, they'd recoil in scorn or disgust."[17]

Take for example, the common problem of "performance anxiety" that many musicians face when leading up to an event and performing on stage. Our minds are constantly racing with worry, hands trembling, palms sweaty, knees shaking. We doubt our ability and even start to wonder why we are performing at all. "Who am I to do this? Will others think badly of me? They must know I'm an imposter, faking all of this." Fantasies begin to race through the mind, none of them rooted in reality. All of these thoughts can be a typical reel we repeat in our heads when

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[15] Joseph Burgo. "What I Mean When I Use the Word Shame." After Psychotherapy. July 22, 2012. Accessed March 1, 2016. http://www.afterpsychotherapy.com/basic-shame-revisited/
[16] Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now* (Vancouver: Namaste Publishing, 2004), 50.
[17] Joseph Burgo, "What I Mean When I Use the Word Shame." After Psychotherapy. July 22, 2012. Accessed March 1, 2016. http://www.afterpsychotherapy.com/basic-shame-revisited/

faced with a performance. Why is that we are afraid to showcase what we have practiced so hard to bring to the world? Simply put, our utmost fear is that if we make a mistake in any shape or form to the people around us, they will *finally see us for who we really are.*[18] The emotional "armor" that has protected our vulnerable nature inside will crack in the slightest way and people will eventually see the imposter on stage. The vulnerable person realizes his flaws and does not try to cover them up. Mistakes are inevitable, he assures himself. He might still be anxious but not overtly so to the point of wanting to quit or run away. Ego, on the other hand, despises anything short of perfectionism. The ironic part of all this anxiety is that it is a self-fulfilling prophecy: the worry and anguish over the performance may be the very thing that causes it. To put in other words, mistakes begin to emerge *because* of the individual's worry and anxiety. However, this is lost on most musicians who are not self-aware of the process at work. Let's say that Josh is a budding pianist and he has the first performance of his life coming up. All of the usual suspects start to show up: butterflies in stomach, mind racing, no concentration. Josh then goes on stage, and due to his nerves begins to make mistakes. For the rest of his playing career Josh might inadvertently attribute his mistakes to other causes (such as "the lights are too bright, I didn't get enough to eat, it's too cold in here", etc.) instead of realizing that his blunders are ultimately caused by his warped thinking. From then on performance anxiety may become rooted in him every time he goes on stage and he won't know why. The ego will operate subconsciously for the rest of his life until he is aware of how it is sabotaging his work.

When our carefully molded façades begin to wear thin, we begin to feel anxious about the core shame we have experienced early in childhood coming through to others. The reason musi-

[18] *Ibid.*

cians feel so anxious about performing is that our internal "ugliness" might be exposed to an audience who we mistakenly assume expect perfection. To hide our flaws we try to be as perfect as we can so that people won't know our shame, and this manifests itself in presenting as flawless an image to others as we can.[19] Of course, this never works: there is no such thing as perfection in reality. Vladimir Horowitz, widely considered to be one of the best pianists of all time, frequently suffered from stage fright.[20] No matter how many standing ovations he got, no matter the awards or ceremonies in his honor, he still felt that deep seated anxiety before going up on stage. In fact, it was so bad that he went years between concerts even though his reputation preceded him.[21] Why would one of the world's most skilled pianists still be afraid to play in front of people who paid to see him play? One can only speculate, but it was most likely due to his internal shaming being rubbed on every time he went on stage. It was probable that his anxiety was made worse due to his prestige within the musical community and the pressure to perform was too much to handle. No matter how good the musician is, not dealing with internal shaming can arise in unexpected situations such as performing for an audience.

For a follower of Christ, the Scripture has numerous references to the ego. There is the psychological as well as the theological viewpoint that must be considered. The first chapter of Genesis details how God formed His creation out of a void of nothing and saw that it was good.[22] His greatest creation, humanity, was content to live freely with no sense of past or future (only the present). Genesis 2:25 even states that, "Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no

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[19] S. S Sagar & J. Stoeber, "Perfectionism, fear of failure, and affective responses to success and failure: The central role of fear of experiencing shame and embarrassment." *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology* 31(5) (2009): 624.
[20] Amanda Angel, "Top Five Infamous Cases of Stage Fright." WQXR. March 18, 2015. Accessed March 14, 2016. http://www.wqxr.org/#!/story/top-5-cases-stage-fright/
[21] *Ibid.*
[22] Genesis 1, NIV

shame." When Eve eats the fruit, it is the desire to become like God that causes her to disobey God's orders. Suddenly, an inner shame is present and both she and Adam scramble to cover themselves up. Why hide their authentic nature? What is there now that wasn't before? Simply put, their true natures were split off and the ego was created. With its creation came the host of humanity's problems (war, murder, genocide, religious crusades—all tied to an egoistic mentality.) Galatians 5:17 states that, "For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want." The "flesh" may be construed as our human bodies acting out in disobedience, but the crux of the issue is our sinful nature. In Greek, "σάρξ (sarx)" is used to describe actions made by our selfish nature and apart from God. Our "flesh" contradicts God's provision and instead makes decisions based out of fear. Once we separate the ego from mindlessly controlling us it is much easier to realize a fulfilled existence.

Dallas Willard notes that the fundamental problem with human nature is within the heart, and our only true means of living in a righteous manner is through a transforming of our inner selves.[23] He states that, "Now and throughout the ages this has been acknowledged by everyone who has thought deeply about our condition—from Moses, Solomon, Socrates, and Spinoza, to Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Oprah, and current feminists and environmentalists".[24] Willard adds that although philosophers and others have pondered the nature of our spirit, the disagreement arises on *how* that change can be brought about. The only guaranteed and genuine manner of transformation, according to Willard, is through God himself.[25] It is not possible for humans to merely solve the problem of our existence through our own understanding. When we are not even aware

[23] Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2002), 14.
[24] *Ibid.*
[25] Willard, *Renovation*, 20.

of the ego, it can run undeterred on auto-pilot in our day to day lives. To transform ourselves, we must first realize the problem: we are broken, and no amount of validation or material possession will fix that. To assuage our disappointment, we convince ourselves that we need "things" to repair ourselves. These "things" don't necessarily have to be material: Willard states: "[a] great danger in the thought life of the disciple is allowing our desires to guide our thinking: especially the desire to prove we are right. This goes hand in hand with intellectual self-righteousness and is often associated with the desire to have the approval of others in 'our crowd'".[26] The ego loves approval of others, even at the behest of personal wishes and desires. This is why people can live completely contradictory lives: they are in stark conflict with their authentic self and the self-image they portray to other people. The drug of choice here is the approval of others at the expense of yourself. To truly be transformed we must first recognize this broken nature and work diligently to root out toxic habits we have instilled.

The ego would love for us to simply continue on with how we are dealing with our shame (namely, ignoring it), but with self-awareness we can better resist primal instincts. Andrew P. Morrison notes that, "shame generates concealment out of a fear of rendering the self unacceptable."[27] To hide shame from others, we must first hide it from ourself. One of the first steps in dealing with our shame is to assure ourselves that we might do bad things, but *we are not bad ourselves*. Broucek states that, "Shame reactions are originally provoked when one's loss of instinctual control, physical defects…and failures are exposed to others."[28] This revelation can be surprising and met with skeptical criticism to those with low self-esteem and a profound sense of

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[26] Willard, *Renovation*, 110.
[27] Andrew P. Morrison, *Shame: The Underside of Narcissism* (Burlingame: The Analytic Press, 1997), 2.
[28] Francis J. Broucek, "Shame and its relationship to early narcissistic developments" *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 63 (Jan. 1982): 369.

shame. It is entirely normal for the ego to instantly judge hard truths as being foreign or nonsensical. Remember how the ego likes to subdivide what is "good" and "bad" for us? Upon coming into contact with the harsh reality about our current lives, there may be a sense of turmoil and confusion within the mind. Since we are completely unaware of the ego and how it damages us, we silently wreak havoc on our mental health without knowing why. It is only when we are self-aware does the ego start to dissolve. We need to remember that since we created the ego, we can also destroy it in systematic ways.

With these ideas about the ego in mind, how does the musician reconcile this part of themselves to fully be alive in creating beautiful sounds? The first step to creativity is to be completely entrenched in reality and not in fantasy. While it isn't damaging to look up to a certain standard, the process of music creation can morph into frustration and anger by unnecessary comparison and jealousy. The ego loves to compare—by doing so it distracts the individual from taking a cold hard look at his own life. Remember, shame says, "I'm not good enough", whereas self-love and acceptance says, "I am enough". With a full acceptance of self there is no room for jealousy or comparative thinking. Johann Sebastian Bach is considered to be the founder of Western tonal harmony (the aptly named "Father of Music") and produced hundreds of compositions over his lifetime. He is quoted as saying, "I was obliged to be industrious. Whoever is equally industrious will succeed equally well."[29] While it might be easy to dismiss Bach's prolific output as a result of some unnatural genius, the evidence shows that his hard work made him great. This outlines the fact that creativity in the musical realm is strictly achieved through the lens of reality and is rarely sole inspiration. Bach rarely attributed his prolific output to natural

[29] Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York City: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 50.

talent, but rather perseverance and hard work.[30] To be completely realistic, one can be as good as Bach if the musician puts in the time.

An unhealthy idealization of others (such as the widely influential Bach or other acclaimed musicians) is a direct response to the shame in our lives. This is achieved by distancing one's self from the broken aspect of the individual and to project those painful feelings into a fantasy inflicted onto others.[31] Most frequently this leads to perfectionism, or the overwhelming desire to have no perceivable flaws. Note that the theme of being utterly and absolutely "perfect" is common within the egoistic mind, as we have the utmost desire to cover up our shame with what we have created. To motivate the individual the ego instills a deep fear of failure, and this fear becomes the driving force in one's life. The ego convinces us that if we have everything in our lives set up to perfection (including other aspects such as perfect relationships, perfect sex life, perfect career, etc.) then we can finally accept who we are on the inside and all of our problems will magically fade. In reality, this never happens.

If one pins absolute self-worth and worthiness onto external means, there will always be disappointment waiting in the end. To be perfect is an idealized and irrational fantasy.[32] Great music was never built on "perfection" although we might perceive it as such. Bach was human, and so is everyone else we might idealize. Perfectionism is a large reason why we simply don't "do"—we wait for the "perfect" opportunity to unleash our talents and creation out into the world. As a result, it is easy to stall out and simply sit around waiting for a magical solution to arrive at our doorstep. When our work falls short of the perfectionistic (i.e. "flawless") standard

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[30] *Ibid.*

[31] Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (Madison: International Universities Press, 1979), 46.

[32] Bahtiyar Eraslan Çapan, "Relationship among perfectionism, academic procrastination and life satisfaction of university students", *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 5 (2010): 1666.

we have set up for ourselves, discouragement sets in. According to a study done by Shulamit Mor, "self-oriented perfectionism…was associated with increased levels of state and trait anxiety."[33] In the same study, socially prescribed perfectionism (i.e. others expecting perfection) coupled with the self-oriented variant produced higher levels of anxiety than even depressed patients.[34] The process of creating gets abandoned since our failure damages the ego. Lies we tell ourselves (namely, that we aren't good/skilled/talented enough to make any difference) keep us from growing and learning about ourselves. Instead, they harbor resentment and impatience within us which eventually blocks creative growth.

At its core, we must understand that the inner critic has good intentions; namely, that the critic wants to shield itself from feelings of disappointment, frustration and anger over the work. In *Healing Your Emotional Self*, Beverly Engel states that "your inner critic generally recognizes the importance of essential human qualities, but it does not believe that you have them innately."[35] These inner criticisms begin to manifest themselves in severely limiting ways that go beyond simple disappointment into full blown anguish over the importance of the work itself. The passion for why the musician begins to make music fades away to be replaced by endless worrying of others' opinions. To create music at the highest level one must be keenly aware of this inner voice and how it works against musical endeavors. Taken from a viewpoint outside of the ego, criticism can be a very helpful tool to steer us in the right direction. However it is usually so blown out of proportion and personalized that all helpful meaning is ignored in favor of

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[33] Shulamit Mor, Hy I. Day, Gordon L. Flett, Paul L. Hewitt, "Perfectionism, control, and components of performance anxiety in professional artists", *Cognitive Therapy and Research* 19 issue 2 (April 1995): 207-208.
[34] *Ibid.*
[35] Beverly Engel, *Healing Your Emotional Self: A Powerful Program to Help You Raise Your Self-Esteem, Quiet Your Inner Critic, and Overcome Your Shame* (New York City: Wiley, 2007), 217.

protecting the ego. The reason we convince ourselves that other people know better than us is because of egoistic insecurity. Instead of bolstering ourselves and trusting our instincts, we instead delegate the quality of our music to random strangers. The issue of "imitation" is a universal trait that stems out of being uncertain of our abilities. Instead of digging deep down inside of ourselves and bringing forth something new and fresh, we instead doubt our skill and produce a subpar version of someone else's work.

The most pertinent question in the pursuit of great art is simply: how does anyone judge somebody's work? It has been already established that any judgment is inherently seen through the subjective lens of the critic, but could there be an overarching and objective viewpoint or criteria to merit great aestheticism? Berys Gaut states that, "In the narrow sense of the term, aesthetics value properties are those that ground a certain kind of sensory or contemplative pleasure or displeasure. In this sense, beauty, elegance, gracefulness, and their contraries are aesthetic value properties."[36] Other fundamental properties of art include the attitude it takes on, which can range from neutrality about a subject to utter condemnation or exhortation. It is less important, however, to look at the surface of the attitude and instead dig deeper in critical examination.[37] For example, a musical piece depicting over exaggerated acts of sexuality and violence could be construed on a surface level as an ironic vilification of the society it mocks. However, this work could simply be the result of the composer trying to shock and disgust his audience for his own amusement. The attitude it seems to have and the one it actually presents are at ends of

[36] Jerrold Levinson, *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection,* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), 183.
[37] Levinson, *Aesthetics*, 184.

an artistic spectrum. Gaut also makes the distinction that besides aestheticism, we can also "admire it for its cognitive insight…its articulated expression of joy, the fact that it is deeply moving, and so on."[38] To evaluate great art, one must take all of these merits into consideration.

The musician has many defining traits that constitute the day to day work of creating music. In *Art and Fear*, David Bayles enumerates several of these qualities. The first and foremost trait is that art can be learned, and all of the great artists inherently started at the bottom only to fight creative battles everyday to get to their position.[39] What we are influenced by in our childhood coalesces into a hybrid core that we call *taste.* Taste differs from person to person and is the main reason why so many differing forms of music exist today. Bayles goes on to state that art is made by ordinary people, and no one is born into this world with extra ordinary ability.[40] Only through careful cultivation and dedication does the artist produce work that matches with his taste. The concept of *taste* is wholly subjective and is unique to every musician. From this taste comes the desire to create; it is our internal compass to judge our work. Inevitably, we are disappointed by the initial work because of the taste we have acquired. However, it is imperative that the musician pushes through the first few painful years and keep creating. Otherwise, the temptation is to give in to the ego and simply quit. The ego props itself up through flawless behavior, and to fail over and over again contradicts perfectionism. It is through the process of failing hundreds and thousands of times that work finally emerges that matches with our taste. Bayles' final point highlights the importance of process, not finished outcome: to listeners, all

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[38] Jerrold Levinson, *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection,* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), 183.
[39] David Bayles & Ted Orland, *Art & Fear: Observations On the Perils (and Rewards) of Art-making,* (Eugene: Image Continuum Press, 2001), 3.
[40] Bayles & Orland, *Art & Fear*, 4.

they hear is the final product.[41] To the creator, however, what is important is the overarching process that the music evolved through. To this point, Bayles argues that musicians should never be focused on the final output but rather be mindful of the process they are going through to achieve the work.

How this failure process is handled is what divides those who persevere and those who eventually quit. Logically the only fundamental difference between the beginner and the master is the amount of hours put into the craft. There has never been a case of unexplainable skill without the time needed to become proficient at one's area of expertise. If one pictures mastery as a never ending highway, the master may be on mile 12,000 while the beginner is at mile 50. Again, the tendency to compare arises, and yet this is an entirely futile exercise. To compare beginner work to master work only invites discouragement, resentment, and jealously; these are all traits that hinder the beginner from simply moving forward with his music. The epiphany arises when the beginner realizes that the master was in the exact same position he is now—the only difference is that he is further along due to the amount of time he spent working. The seminal study by K. Anders Ericsson (later popularized as the "10,000 hours rule" by author Malcolm Gladwell) details the method in which individuals achieve a professional level of performance. In short, his main thesis is that an average of 10,000 hours of deliberate practice put into any craft will allow that individual to become a master at their subject.[42] To determine this, he studied "amateur" and "professional" level piano players and the amount of practice they put in; the

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[41] David Bayles & Ted Orland, *Art & Fear: Observations On the Perils (and Rewards) of Art-making*, (Eugene: Image Continuum Press, 2001), 5.
[42] K. Anders Ericsson, Ralf Th. Krampe, and Clemens Tesch-Romer, "The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance" *Psychological Review* Vol. 100. No. 3 (1993): 369.

amateurs averaged 2,000 hours while the professionals were around the 10,000 hour mark.[43] The only reliable and consistent factor across the professional's experiences was their commitment to *deliberate* practice: that is, the repetition of their particular skill was intentional and purposeful in its action. Simply listening to 10,000 hours of music would not make one an expert composer, but sitting down and writing out original compositions in the same amount of time would. This is the cause of the biggest discrepancy when measuring skill: even if the amount of hours logged surpasses 10,000, other factors still weigh in. How much passion does a person have for their music? Is the musician studying what they are really interested in, or what others have determined is "great"? Is the musician merely clocking in their hours or getting so lost in their practice that time doesn't seem to matter?

So if intentional practice can explain the mastery of a certain subject, does individual talent have any bearing on creation? To regard others as exceptionally talented and therefore fundamentally different unfairly discriminates their abilities and puts them in a separated box from others.[44] Howe states that, "Music is an area of competence thought to be especially dependent upon talent…hence practice effects in other areas of competence are likely to be at least as strong as in music."[45] However, he goes on to say that, "To summarise, there may be little or no basis for innate giftedness."[46] This is due to his findings that even "normal" people with no early signs of talent can achieve mastery of their craft with sufficient training and even so called "talented"

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[43] K. Anders Ericsson, Ralf Th. Krampe, and Clemens Tesch-Romer, "The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance" *Psychological Review* Vol. 100. No. 3 (1993): 382.
[44] Michael J. A. Howe & Jane. W. Davidson, & John. A. Sloboda, "Innate Talents: Reality Or Myth?" *Behavioural and Brain Sciences* 21 (1998): 399-442.
[45] *Ibid.*
[46] Michael J. A. Howe & Jane. W. Davidson, & John. A. Sloboda, "Innate Talents: Reality Or Myth?" *Behavioural and Brain Sciences* 21 (1998): 399-442.

individuals still required the massive amount of hours and work to attain a professional level skill. [47] Howe studied savants in his work who were otherwise mentally handicapped yet possessed skill beyond their years; he wondered if autistic and severely handicapped children possessed talent that could otherwise be unexplained. However, he noted that their mental state lent themselves to specific proclivities. For example, one savant could accurately transpose a melody even though his speech was practically nonexistent. It was noted that his autism led him to playing the piano for hours on end, which is atypical for a 5 year old child.[48] So is talent nonexistent? To that end, Howe concludes that talent may exist, but in the way society views it is "simply exaggerated and oversimplified".[49] Instead of being treated as a minimal aspect of an individual, it is instead pinned as the core cause of expert level work. There are many other factors that are vastly more important than an innate ability such as upbringing, early opportunity, practice, encouragement, and resources. Howe states bluntly that, "The evidence we have surveyed in this target article does not support the talent account…"[50] If one desires to become an expert musician, one of the necessities is dedicated and focused practice. Talent may be irrelevant considering many other factors in a musician's life.

While technical proficiency can be explained simply by rote hours, there is another aspect of musicianship that goes ignored in the early stages of learning: the *emotional* performances of the individual. It makes sense that emotional leanings are absent in most beginner work: to understand and inhabit a piece of music, the technicals should be out of the way. Until a musician can simply do without thinking too much about their skill, there will always be a hindering factor

[47] *Ibid.*
[48] *Ibid.*
[49] *Ibid.*
[50] *Ibid.*

in their work. However, the expression of the music starts to come through once the musician starts to understand his work. John A. Sloboda states that, "Expert musical performance is not just a matter of technical motor skill, it also requires the ability to generate expressively different performances of the same piece of music according to the nature of intended structural and emotional communication".[51] To test this, he had different pianists play Chopin's Prelude No. 4 in E Minor and transcribed their performances to MIDI. This allowed him to accurately measure the intensity and timing of each note individually, thus giving a clearer picture of how each pianist expressed the piece.[52] Sloboda noted that "expressively powerful performances" were created using unconventional means.[53] Although many of the performances shared some similarities (such as a rising intensity in the later parts of the piece), he also found significant discrepancies since each player interpreted the piece different. This example showcases the error of thinking that musicality is all about form—the emotional aspect has to play a part as well. One only starts to reach this point once the technicalities of performance or composition are sufficiently met. Sloboda's study explains the wide margin between the beginner and the master musician. While the beginner struggles with simply getting the music down, the master has moved into an entire new realm of emotionally reaching the listener.

Author Steven Pressfield combines the two ideas enumerated thus far: he views the creation of art as a never ending battle between the authentic self and the ego. Pressfield dubs this internal mechanism "Resistance." Throughout *The War of Art*, Pressfield describes in great detail

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[51] John A. Sloboda, "Individual differences in music performance" *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 4 (10) (2000): 397.
[52] Sloboda, "Individual", 401.
[53] *Ibid.*

how Resistance ruins our creative lives; it is entirely invisible, insidious, universal, and is primarily fueled through fear.[54] It is especially prevalent in matters that are the most important; otherwise, why would Resistance even exist? Inherently, anything that is beneficial to us takes hard work, and we unconsciously admire those who have overcome their own Resistance. Why is it so easy to watch TV all day and not do the work that will *actually* make a difference in the future? If one is not aware of the ego, there will always be confusion on why the individual pursues meaningless short term pleasures over long term goals. Even when the musician deems it necessary to sit down and churn out work after work, it often comes at the end of a frustrated and tired battle with Resistance. Even then, Resistance is at work: it uses over enthusiasm and short term thinking to outwit the musician.[55] Eventually the wild passions and initial commitment will fade and the musician will crash. To be a professional artist, one must understand the journey ahead and realize patience is key to success.

How does one defeat Resistance day by day, as it lurks ever presently in the backs of our minds? While acknowledging that Resistance is powerful to the unconscious, Pressfield notes that Resistance can be beaten if the musician is committed. To overcome Resistance, Pressfield notes that, "The professional dedicates himself to mastering technique not because he believes technique is a substitute for inspiration but because he wants to be in possession of the full arsenal of skills when inspiration does come."[56] It is tempting to think that the aforementioned Bach was simply born immensely talented, but even Bach disagrees with that notion. Throughout all of human history the only consistent factor across all masters appears to be the time and dedication

[54] Stephen Pressfield, *The War of Art* (New York City: Rugged Land, 2002), 37-47.
[55] Pressfield, *War*, 149.
[56] Stephen Pressfield, *The War of Art* (New York City: Rugged Land, 2002), 163.

they put into their craft. Pressfield makes a major point to highlight how Resistance is most powerful when confronted with other's opinions. The professional, however, "gives an ear to criticism, seeking to learn and grow…The professional cannot take rejection personally because to do reinforces Resistance."[57] To be "industrious", as Bach put it, one must never take criticism to heart. Critiques are for growth and improvement, but too often is it used as fuel to justify quitting. Adversity, in the face of Resistance, is imperative for the musician to make an impact with his work.[58]

The ego, Resistance, broken human nature and the flesh all point to a deeply ingrained and defective humanity that we live with daily. It is only when we are aware of these processes at work that change and transformation occurs. The daily life of the musician is fraught with many decisions that one must intentionally choose to act upon; otherwise, the work never comes to fruition. While the flesh may work against our true intentions, awareness and conscious action lessen the impact of the ego and instead move the individual closer to God. Through dedicated time and practice, mastery of the music begins to reveal itself. Digging deep down and displaying our authentic nature as God intended separates the individual from the power of the flesh and lets creativity blossom through. The ego will always threaten to thwart our output, telling us lies and falsities to ruin our potential. As Pressfield puts it, "The artist is the servant of that intention, those angels, that Muse. The enemy of the artist is the small-time Ego, which begets Resistance."[59] There will always be the choice to be fearful, to be timid and afraid of what one can accomplish. To desire authenticity is to choose a fulfilled life.

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[57] Pressfield, *War*, 169-172.
[58] Pressfield, *War*, 174.
[59] Stephen Pressfield, *The War of Art* (New York City: Rugged Land, 2002), 303.

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