

The Piano and the Couch: Music and Psyche

By Margret Elson

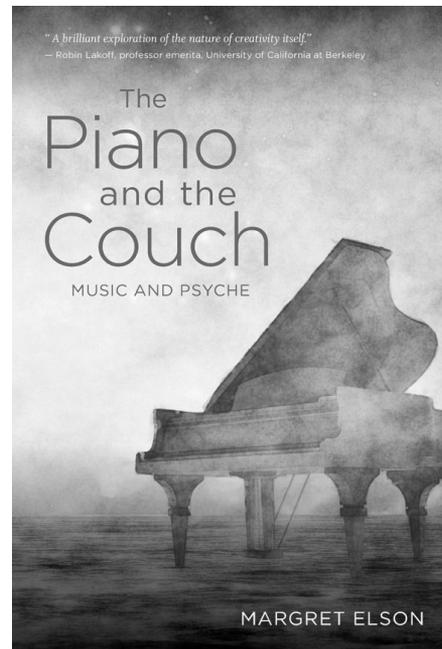
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The celebrated meeting between Sigmund Freud and Gustav Mahler in 1910 was the first known instance of a performing artist seeking out the assistance of a psychotherapist who happened to know something about art. It marked the beginning of what has grown into a permanent relationship between psychotherapists and performing artists. Innumerable performing artists have sought out psychotherapy in the intervening 108 years. It appears that performers seek out psychotherapy to address creative blocks in their artistry, as well as in the non-performing aspects of their lives, when they're not playing. This has been a successful relationship, about which there has been a myriad of professional anecdotes, case presentations, and conference panels.^{1,2} For example, an October 2018 conference at The New York Psychoanalytic Institute brought together Nobel-winning neuroscientists, psychodynamic psychotherapists, and creative artists to discuss the neuropsychology of artistry and creativity. Only recently have psychodynamic theoreticians and clinicians begun to write about it in detail as a specific type of therapeutic relationship, venturing beyond more cognitive and behavioral work with performance anxiety.³ Therefore, we do not yet have sufficient information available about the inter-relatedness of psychological well-being and musical artistry.

Performers, art philosophers, psychoanalysts, and many others have attempted to explain the process, each giving an only incomplete account. The American philosopher Susanne Langer,⁴ who created much of the language we now use to discuss the arts, wrote that an artist seems to know how some part of life feels, its stress and pull and resolution, in a way that is far beyond the ability of words to describe. Psychoanalyst Thomas Ogden⁵ described psychoanalysis in similar language saying that, in psychodynamic psychotherapy, patient and therapist are trying to use language in a way that creates a sense of what it feels like for patients to be human at a particular moment in their lives. With these similarities, one would predict that performing artists would be well-served by a treatment that combined artistic and psychological aspects. Yet, the normative experience of performers is that they have a teacher who helps them with their craft, and they may also have a psychotherapist who helps them otherwise explore them-



selves, to make sense of their life experience, and utilize their internal resources for artistic expression.

Margret Elson is unusual in her integrative approach and this fascinating book describes her work with pianists, as both piano teacher and psychodynamic psychotherapist. The title refers to her actual office, in which pianists move between the client couch and the piano, depending upon their musical/therapeutic need in a given session. Pianists often come to her because of problems with playing, problems that other piano teachers have not known how to fix, or often have not known how to name. These musicians ultimately find that musicianship is closely related to psychological well-being. Ms. Elson helps them understand this relationship and how to productively address both. She is particularly attentive to traumatic experience and its constraining effects on creativity. She uses many of the same techniques that Freud himself might have used, adding her musicianship and her keen awareness of mindfulness and the effects of trauma on the body. Hers is neither a textbook for academics nor a self-help book for pianists. Rather, it is a kind of professional memoir of her experiences with patients and the wisdom she has gained from this work.

The book is divided into four sections. Section I, titled "The Search for Wholeness at Piano and Couch," serves as an introduction to Ms. Elson's ideas about musical and psychological issues often faced by performers who come to her for help. It attempts to convey

her feeling about the way in which musical and psychological wholeness are inextricably connected, interlaced with many examples of the musicians with whom she has worked. Her statement of what is perhaps her most overarching observation uses very personal language and is quite dramatic: “Despite the fact that, in our frenetic, technology-dominated world, listening and paying attention are endangered attributes, they are the glue of true relationships: between ourselves and our art; between friends; among family; with all our surroundings.”(p40) It may sound a bit corny. Yet, to hear this known sentiment re-stated in such a personally optimistic manner can be a helpful source of musings for clinicians who work with both performing artists and trauma survivors.

The second section, which is the core of the book, presents three detailed case studies, each of which entails a combination of performance pedagogy and psychodynamic psychotherapy. Ms. Elson and the pianists struggled to reduce performance anxiety, as well as to resolve other technical and musical issues. In the process, deeply personal challenges emerged concerning love relationships, families of origin, prior experiences with teachers, feelings of isolation and unworthiness, severe mental health diagnoses, as well as childhood sexual abuse. All of these impacted performers’ playing, as one might expect, given what we know about artistry and about trauma. But in Ms. Elson’s hands, impacts on performance are approached and explored directly. In the process, teacher and student, or psychotherapist and patient, create a space that integrates the two relationships, moving seamlessly between them as necessary. There is also much work on mindfulness training and body awareness, particularly the ways in which a performer’s body holds anxiety and memory. Ms. Elson keeps good records of her sessions with students and her book includes key verbal exchanges that took place during the course of these and other treatments. The reader is able to observe and appreciate her insightful and gentle way of working with the musicians, no matter how incomprehensible or discouraging their challenges appeared to be at certain points in their treatment.

The third section, “Metaphors: Links between Music and Psyche,” is a short distillation of observations and conclusions Ms. Elson reached during her work detailed in the previous section. She names six major challenges faced by these musicians, and briefly explains how each

was handled during treatment. In fact, each of the six reflects a roadblock that most people face at some point in their lives, whether or not they are performers. Each has been written about by many authors in a variety of disciplines. In this form, however, they serve as starting points for clinicians, and perhaps piano teachers, to think more creatively about their musical patients and students. The fourth section, “Terms & Exercises,” is a sort of glossary of the particular techniques Ms. Elson has developed over the years. It also defines more specifically some of the exercises she has created to address mindfulness and body awareness.

Ms. Elson’s cogent and sensitive book demonstrates that the teaching of performing artists can be approached in a manner that also encourages them to approach their lives more holistically. She proves that the teaching of music and other performing arts can be accomplished with particular attention to empathy, psychological insight, and an awareness that artistic issues and life issues are inextricably intertwined. As a clinician whose specialty is working with artists, the author of this review concurs. One would hope for more books and articles that document the processes and outcomes of this important work and might help us to formulate more precise theories of how, when, and why it succeeds.

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