How the Conservatory Paradigm Impacts Mental Health?

Senior Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University

Undergraduate Program in Sociology
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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

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May 2017

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5/5/17

Abstract:

Popular media likes to attribute conservatories as boiling pots for mental disorder, but is there any accuracy to this statement? Do conservatories really cause mental breakdowns? I propose that there are aspects of conservatories that contribute to mental distress, but that there is not enough research to conclude that conservatories cause higher levels of mental distress when compared to a traditional university, such as the one I currently attend: Brandeis University. Even observing different conservatories provides unique stories that make it difficult to create a consensus. However, there are aspects of numerous institutions that contribute to mental health. Roughly 3% of students at the Music School¹ in the Boston area focus primarily on the brass instrument, and a class of these advanced students are the subject of this ethnographic research on the relationship between mental health and conservatories.² Once a week for two months I observed their six-person class, the building it was taught in, and annotated relevant information. It was found that even if the data is still inconclusive on whether conservatories cause higher levels of mental health issues than a more traditional university, there are still many mechanisms found in this specific conservatory that do impact mental health. “A social mechanism, as defined here, is a constellation of entities and activities that are linked to one another in such a way that they regularly bring about a particular type of outcome. (kl 181)”³ Although I cannot provide a health comparison, I can unveil possible mechanisms

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¹ Pseudonym
that could explain the relationship between conservatory education and the incidence of mental illness among their students. These results call into question the stereotype of the “tortured artist” as unfounded, and provide solutions to improve the format of conservatories, which will allow for a more welcoming environment. The purpose of this research is to look into the mechanism that could potentially link conservatory education with mental health, and provide an avenue for future research on this possible connection. In tandem, using this research to implement methods to improve the mental health of students in conservatories.

**Introduction:**

As evidenced in the works *The Soloist: A Lost Dream, an Unlikely Friendship, and the Redemptive Power of Music* by Steve Lopez and *Whiplash* by Damien Chazelle, there is a lot of media attention on students who attend conservatories and their “inevitable” mental breakdown. This phenomenon is also directly related to the cliché of the “tortured artist”, which is similarly hyperbolized in the media. Throughout this research I intend to question where this stereotype comes from, and if there is any validity to it? Is there really a connection between attending performance conservatories and mental illness? How can this be compared to a traditional institution? Finally, what role does the conservatory paradigm play in this relationship, and how do we achieve the mechanisms to prove this?

The Music School, where this research was conducted, is a fairly small institution of about 4500 students, in the center of Boston. In this institution, there is very minimal amount of space for the students to practice, do homework, or even relax in between

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4 Sussman, Adrienne. 2007.
particularly difficult classes. Architecturally, the building where the brass students primarily rehearsed was small and narrow, and unless you were taking a class on the first floor, there were no areas to sit down. The format of the particular room we were in was also small, students had to share music stands, and only one person could get out their instrument at a time, otherwise the room would be cluttered with open instrument cases. The most peculiar aspect of the room, and of other rooms in the building, is that a lot of them did not have many windows. The building itself only had windows on the first floor as well. The one window we had in the room tended to be covered up by rogue, instruments, amplifiers, and curtains. It struck me as odd that a building where students spend a lot their time, had little interaction with environmental light. The reasoning behind this was the need for soundproofing in the classrooms. These observations helped commence my research, and further my belief that there is a need for understanding of this relationship. However, my curiosity in regards to mental health and the arts dates back much further than my ethnographic research at the Music School.

History:

Seven years ago I spent my first summer at a world renowned performance conservatory with other Broadway hopefuls competing for leads in their prestigious productions. After three days worth of auditions, a cast list would be posted that decided precisely what kind of summer we were going to have: a chance to shine as a lead or a forgettable part in the chorus. However, there was a glimmer of hope if you were only cast in the chorus because also on this same day callbacks and invitations were displayed for the whole camp to see who would have an opportunity to show their worth for the

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competitive singing, dancing, and acting troupes that were praised. If you did not make it onto any of these lists you were demoted to taking low-level classes, boring rehearsals, and watching your friends get to visit with casting agents and learn techniques from stars who had “made it” in the business. However, through all this pressure and disappointment, I was one of several students to still convince their parents to send in the deposit check for next year, so that we could have another chance at impressing the directors. This is the best way to describe the mind and passion of a performer, and also the expectations placed on even the youngest hopefuls.

I spent four years at that theater camp being criticized by directors, yelled at by instructors, and pressured to choose another field, but I always came back every year that I could. There was something so appealing about this community and the addictive quality of being on stage that always drew me back. No doubt this is also what drove back all of the Broadway and movie star potentials each year who knew they were bound to be disheartened again this summer. I have never cried more than I did in those three weeks every summer, and I never observed more people trying to hold onto a shred of dignity that they no longer felt they had. At sometimes it bordered on emotional abuse, but no parents would ever hear you say that. In fact, I did not know one person who was successful in making it a summer without mentally breaking down from all the expectations being placed on 12-18 years olds. This breaking down took shape in the form of crying in their rooms, skipping rehearsal and classes, or in the most extreme cases leaving the program early. Even the most successful student who had previously worked in the professional arts field could not handle the distress. The idea for my senior thesis came about through these experiences, and also witnessing my friends go off to
performance conservatories after leaving the program. The appeal of performance still draws them in, but unfortunately the pressure is even higher. It is important to note that different forms of art may provide different relationships with mental health, but those who have a performance aspect can be seen to exhibit similar experiences due to synonymous preparation techniques. Throughout the course of this research I intend to provide a glimpse into the emotions that go into being specifically a music performer, and how the conservatory dynamic does not assist to mental growth.

**History of Conservatory Education:**

The name conservatory is defined as "to 'conserve' the tradition and history of performance, to teach in the manner of the great masters".\(^6\) Students attend conservatories to learn from some of the most successful musicians, get acclimated to the expectations of a performance career, and craft their already extremely evident skill. Conservatories are created to provide a performance focus that is not always available in a regular education setting; it is for those who are certain that they want a career in performance arts. In a university, students are provided the opportunity to test out different fields before coming to a decision on what field to focus on, and can even change their major well into their third year.\(^7\) This format acknowledges that university students are still young, and may need more time to make a decision. It is important to consider that students backgrounds impact what classes are available to them in high school, and therefore what they still may need more of in college.\(^8\)

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\(^6\) Mitchell, Emily. 2007.

\(^7\) J. Star, Observation.

\(^8\) J. Star, Observation.
Although universities also provide the ability to work with successful professors in their given fields, there is a greater understanding of the student’s uncertainty and need for flexibility when taking introductory classes, as they have yet to commit to the field. Conservatories place an expectation on students that are much different than at universities, especially when starting out. This provides a link between mental health and conservatories, as sociological factors are known triggers of mental distress.\textsuperscript{9} The relationship between mental health and conservatories becomes solidified through the mechanism of stress, and potentially other mechanisms attempting to be uncovered. It is especially important for this type of research to receive proper approval as we are delving into the minds and relationships of real people.

**Methods:**

Through the Institutional Review Board and the administration at the Music School, I gained access to perform ethnographic research at the Music School for the Fall 2016 semester. As a typical ethnographic research project, I was given permission to observe the classroom, in silence, and take any notes and quotations stated by the students or professor. I elected ethnography as my research method, as opposed to interviews, because I wanted to understand the relationships in the classroom without the pressure of interacting with someone they do not know. This pressure impacts how subjects answer questions, so I decided I needed the most real classroom relationships, which are more evident in ethnographic research. The main downfall of this type of research is that you are not able to ask any questions, but hope that one of the student’s brings up a topic you are curious about.

\textsuperscript{9} Horwitz, Allan. 1990.
The class consisted of all performance majors, brass focus specifically, so the experience of having a quiet observer did not provide much distraction to their classroom interactions. I elected this specific class because I was looking for an advanced level class with students who were seasoned at the Music School, and who provided a racially diverse sample. This is how I came across this particular six-person brass class. Although I was successful in working with a racially diverse sample, I was unable to find a class that also provided a variation in gender. The students were aware of the specific research I was conducting, as some were able to observe me annotating, but as performance majors, they were used to having people view them. Due to scheduling, I was only able to attend six sessions, but luckily the students were extremely vocal so this proved to not be an extreme detriment. The reason this lack of time occurred was because my IRB had to go through several rounds of review, so even though I turned it in in July, it was not approved for several months.

The site of the Music School was elected as the basis for my research due to its prestige as a conservatory, and also due to my connections that allowed this to be a plausible research site. I actually knew a few students at the school, so other than the IRB discrepancies, getting access was not an extreme issue. The Music School is known as one of the best music programs in the nation, therefore once granted access, it was the clear choice for this particular project.

**Literature Review:**

The intersection between mental health and creativity can be linked back to the first “tortured artist”: Vincent Van Gogh. Bipolar disorder has even been correlated with
poets and creative writers (Jamison 1989).\textsuperscript{10} The idea of the tortured artists runs rampant in collective culture (Garber 2002).\textsuperscript{11} It seems there has always been this unspoken connection between the two subjects, even if the accuracy behind it is questioned. However, the association between conservatories specifically and mental health is a completely uncharted phenomena. In 2014 the feature film Whiplash written and directed by Damien Chazelle hit audiences, and called into question, for one of the first times, the mental distress of those in performance conservatories. The movies followed Andrew Neiman, a talented first year jazz musician at one of the most prestigious conservatories in the nation.\textsuperscript{12} Throughout the film we observe him bleeding from over-practicing, being verbally and physically abused by his orchestra director, and giving up all other relationships for the pursuit of music perfection.\textsuperscript{13} A necessity to achieve genius is at the crux of both Andrew and his music director, Terrence Fletcher’s, premise. They will stop at nothing to achieve success or genius. This is the type of drive that is present in several conservatory students. I wanted to see how accurate this pressure really is in conservatories, and whether students go to debilitating lengths to achieve genius status. As mentioned the concept of a genius is highly analyzed, and the history of it provides an even more complex and controversial story. There are those who believe that genius is something that is impossible to attain, yet others find it to be used too much in regular conversation.\textsuperscript{14} For the sake of conservatories, students are attempting to achieve the unachievable, or risk everything in the pursuit of it.

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\textsuperscript{10} Garber, Marjorie. 2002. \\
\textsuperscript{11} Garber, Marjorie. 2002. \\
\textsuperscript{12} Chazelle, Damien. 2015. \\
\textsuperscript{13} Chazelle, Damien. 2015. \\
\textsuperscript{14} Garber, Marjorie. 2002. 
\end{flushright}
There is the phenomena of the “natural genius”, which as highlighted in the work of Marjorie Garber, is entirely unattainable because you are either born with the innate skill or not.\textsuperscript{15} Almost every individual who attends a conservatory is striving for this “natural genius”, even if it impossible to reach. One of the aspects that can be observed through research of conservatories is this desire to achieve the impossible, as was evident within \textit{Whiplash} and also in my research. Of the students who are accepted into the Music School, only a small percentage will succeed to the level of genius, in this case genius being defined as an outstanding gift that only the esoteric have acquired.\textsuperscript{16} Students are constantly vying for spots in choirs, performances, bands, etc., and for some this goal may not even be a possibility.\textsuperscript{17} At some point those who reach the top positions are those who not only have the highest practice ethics, but also the ones who have an innate genius quality that cannot be obtained through further learning or rehearsal. Getting into the Music School does not guarantee that you have the level of genius to be prosperous, so there is still this added pressure on students to commit all of their energy towards the achievement of this standard, and added pressure exemplifies a sociological trigger of mental illness.

The sociology of mental illness provides an important lens into mental health and what causes people to struggle with it. It analyzes specific group pressures that impact mental distress. Professor Allan V. Horwitz attempts to quantify mental illness in sociological terms, and the different phenomena of how to even approach mental health within Sociology.

\textsuperscript{15} Garber, Marjorie. 2002.
\textsuperscript{16} Garber, Marjorie. 2002.
\textsuperscript{17} Garber, Marjorie. 2002.
The most common style accepts the prevalent definition of mental illness and searches for the social causes of mental disturbances in individuals. A second style, more common in anthropological and historical than in sociological studies, examines how symptoms that emerge in individuals are cultural products of particular sociohistorical contexts. Both address the social causes of symptoms but make different assumptions about whether psychiatric symptoms emerge independently of cultural contexts or are cultural products.\textsuperscript{18}

Horwitz provides an excellent framework for expressing the cultural and sociopolitical impacts on mental health, and allows us to proceed with research on the social factors that contribute to mental illness. Factors proposed such as labeling, environment, and stresses all influence someone’s likelihood of having a mental disorder and dealing with it in a healthy manner.\textsuperscript{19} For example, someone who is in a stressful environment would be less likely to cope with mental distress; similar to that of physical health issues they heal more quickly when in a state of rest. At the Music School, as mentioned earlier, there is this prevalence of stress that is emphasized through the teachers, students, and even the environment itself. Students are unable to heal from health issues, whether pre-existing or not, due to the culture of places such as the Music School.

\textbf{Studying the Music School:}

One of the best and worst decisions I ever made was giving up the life of a performer for Sociology. It acknowledged that my main interest within theater was the observation of the other actors, and the dynamics of a theater. Performance is one of the most addictive and amazing fields, and anyone who was in my class at the Music School,

\textsuperscript{18} Horwitz, Allan V. 1999.
\textsuperscript{19} Horwitz, Allan. 1999.
would agree. This class consisted of advanced level brass students who were learning how to sight-read and improvise some of the most complex jazz pieces for brass players. All of these students had been playing brass instruments for several years, and were much above the average level of proficiency of students in traditional high schools and colleges.\(^{20}\) When I walked into the Music School for the first day, it was like I flashed back seven years to that nervous girl trying desperately to be noticed, and cracking under the pressure. People at the Music School were practicing in every spare moment they had, there were advertisements for every audition possible, and students were shuffling with sheet music and large instrument cases because there was nowhere to sit.\(^{21}\)

Within the classroom there is also the added pressure of the professor and the talent of students in their classes. “You just want to watch us flail around don’t you?” a student proclaimed to the professor after a particular difficult sight-reading section.\(^{22}\) Although most of the observations and quotations annotated during my time at the Music School were said in a joking manner, there was still some underlying truth to some of these statements. Students are expected to practice three to six hours a day to keep up with this high level of expertise.\(^{23}\) At the end of each semester students stop all of their private lessons and lab classes to focus on auditions, so they can get into a more competitive class for the next semester. There is always this mentality of becoming stronger and more competitive, and whether intentionally or not is ingrained in the school system.

\(^{20}\) J.Star, Observation, November 1, 2016.
\(^{21}\) J.Star, Observation, November 1, 2016.
\(^{22}\) J.Star, Observation, December 6, 2016.
\(^{23}\) J.Star, Observation, December 6, 2016.
There is something about the conservatory paradigm that causes those who attend it to be almost perpetually stressed, and therefore more likely to struggle with mental illness. It was discovered through this research that there is an aspect of the environment of conservatories that prevents individuals from appropriately dealing with their mental health. Also, the stigma around mental health is more present than ever in this school format. When I was attending summer camp, one of the most shameful things you could do was have a mental breakdown during rehearsal. It was certainly acceptable to struggle, but it was an unspoken rule that it could not happen in front of a director. Being invited to attend the Music School is such an honor that students do no want to appear weak in either setting. Showing this weakness could be detrimental to your continuation in a performance program. As much misery as I may have experienced at summer camp, I never wanted to admit just how much it was bothering me because it risked losing something that I craved more than anything.

As mentioned previously, the idea for this project was contrived based on my own experiences, but also through the research of movies and novels based on the topics outlined. My two main points of popular works media arts that I drew from to create this thesis topic were *The Soloist* a novel by Steve Lopez, and *Whiplash* a movie by Damien Chazelle. Both of these works showcase current or hypothetical conservatory students, and their struggles with the physical and mental pressure of this form of education. We observe how the expectations are so high on these students that they practice at all hours of the night, and have emotional breakdowns even during performances. Although these extremes were not evident during my time at the Music School, it is reasonable to hypothesize that there are factors present in a conservatory like the Music School that
lead to increased mental distress. However, each conservatory has a different structure that impact this in a severe manner, the comparison becomes the most blatant when comparing the Music School to the most competitive conservatory in the country: Juilliard.

**Juilliard vs. the Music School:**

It is important to highlight some of the contrasts between the conservatory I attended, the Music School, and one of the other most popular conservatories, Juilliard, which is the most competitive one in the country. Although some of my recommendations can be instituted in all conservatories, to assume that all conservatories struggle with the same topic of mental health is an assumption that cannot be made. *The Soloist*, although extremely important to this research, is not based specifically on the Music School, but on Juilliard, where the expectations, setting, and distress levels are quite different. It is mentioned within the novel that a sizable percentage of Juilliard students at some point suffered from a mental breakdown, whereas at the Music School there simply is not enough information to guarantee that students have exceptionally higher rates of mental breakdowns than at any other school. Also, the story follows around Nathaniel Ayers, who was one of the first black students to ever attend Juilliard, so some of the distresses he expressed simply cannot be compared to the students at the Music School. In fact, the stereotype that individuals who pursue arts degrees struggle with mental health is not founded enough to actually be taken as true sociological evidence. Therefore, I implemented an approach that focuses on the overall improvement

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of conservatories in regards to mental health, as there is always more work to be done in creating more welcoming environments for college students.

Since most of the research that has been done around conservatories is about Juilliard, my focus on the Music School becomes all the more important. Work conducted solely on Juilliard is extremely limiting because as evidenced there is a lot of contrast between conservatories such as acceptance rates, location, etc. that contribute to different environments. As with other forms of undergraduate education it would be impossible to compare two schools in completely different areas without acknowledging this factor. There is a need for further examination of different conservatories other than just Juilliard to observe the connections and disparities, especially in relationship to location. New York City by its nature is much more competitive for performing arts than Boston as students are aspiring to Broadway or Radio City Music Hall. I was curious about how the Music School would compare as it in a less intense location. This observation proved to be novel as it was found that the link between mental distress and the conservatory paradigm at the Music School was much less evident. However, there were still aspects observed that could be improved to enhance mental health, especially when observing the different educational format of a BFA.

**BA/BFA:**

There are two methods to achieving a degree in music: the BA track and the BFA track. The Bachelor of Arts degree is available to students who attend a traditional university, whereas the Bachelor of Fine Arts is what you receive at a conservatory. From my observations at Brandeis University, the BA teaches you music in the same method as other university courses, whereas the BFA follows the structure of a performance
career. A question that comes to mind is whether something that can be learned by conservatories about this more conventional form of learning music. As mentioned, the BA tracks mimics that of other Bachelor of Arts degrees as it allows students to take music classes as well as taking classes in other majors, and overall allowing them a more traditional college experience. The BFA is created for students to develop an understanding of a career in music, and is not offered in most schools with non-music majors. It is important to note that there are schools that provide an exception to this rule, but overall this is a common phenomenon. There are certainly benefits to both forms of education, but this research begins to question whether conservatory programs can learn something in regards to mental health from a more regular form of education. Especially in regards to the pressure and anxiety associated with conservatory education that is not manifested in the same way as in other forms of education. Further research into this relationship could potentially bring light to creating the best type of education for musicians. For the purpose of understanding I split up this discussion into three sections: environment, competition, and the uncertain nature of performance careers.

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27 J. Star, Observation.
From the lack of light and seating areas, it causes students to be very insulated, and especially in a city such as Boston where the sunset is very early this poses a significant problem to mental health.\textsuperscript{29} As you have less interaction with the sun, your melatonin levels decrease, which can lead to seasonal depression. In its own way, the Music School is creating a hub for seasonal depression by not allowing their students exposure to light and relaxation. It is important to note, I am sure the intended cause of

\textsuperscript{28} J. Star, Observation, November 1, 2016.  
\textsuperscript{29} Kent, Shia. 2009.
these architectural anomalies is not for any malicious purpose, but simply due to both the need for soundproof rooms and the nature of hallways. Soundproof rooms, by their nature do not allow for a lot of outside interaction, so to create a noticeable change an architect would need to be hired. This would probably be the most difficult beneficial alteration to the Music School, however there are others that could be implemented as soon as possible if the administration finds them novel.

The Class:

The actual class I attended was a very welcoming experience, where students were invited to joke and have conversations with the professor, however the pressure of the conservatory is still present. I learned that to be a professional performer, sight-reading is an important part of the job, as you may be hired to work a show and not get the sheet music until the day of. It is therefore imperative that it only takes a few attempts for a previously unlearned piece of music to be perfect. “By the third time you’re fired…” Student D joked, but including some underlying truth. A musician could be fired dependent on if they can sight read the music quickly enough, as there is always another musician that could replace you. However, there is no reward for being highly skilled in sight-reading, as it is an extreme expectation of the job. “We should get a Grammy for that sight reading” stated Student C, again as a joke because the musician rarely receives or expects praise for their work. The main observation from being in the class is that the students and professor love to joke around about the trials of the musician, but still clearly feel its impacts. There was rarely a day that students were not

31 J.Star, Observation, November 1, 2016.
interacting with stressors, and there are too many sociological factors that can contribute to this such as Race and Gender.

**Race/Gender:**

Two important mechanisms of mental health are the social factors of gender and race, the latter being extremely relevant to the story of Nathaniel Ayers in *the Soloist*. As mentioned, Nathaniel was one of the first black students at Juilliard, so his battle with Schizophrenia is impacted by this mechanism. Several of his schizophrenic attacks involve a social awareness of his racial difference from the other students. It always is important to acknowledge the influence of race and gender when conducting social research, and it is evident that race is important to the research of Steve Lopez. The class that I observed at the Music School was all male with a male professor. Therefore the topic of gender, though important to highlight, is not a relevant mechanism to mental health in this specific conservatory class. A similar conversation can be made for race, as the Music School is considered extremely diverse. Race is always an important topic as we as a society need to improve on making education more available to a more diverse population. However, the specific class I was in was extremely diverse, as of the six students only one of them was white. There are dynamics that could be analyzed of being a non-white student with a white professor, but no factors were analyzed within my time there to allude towards this. Therefore, we refer back to the other mechanisms highlighted that contribute to mental health, such as the stress of the audition process.

**The System:**

The audition process to get into the Music School and other conservatories also can contribute an added distress to potential students who are interested in attending.
Students have 15 minutes to display a piece of choral music, improvisation, and a reading selection or ear training exercise.\textsuperscript{32} There is also a chance that one of the judges might ask you to perform something else during the audition process that you will not know about until you get into the room.\textsuperscript{33} This could be anything from being asked to play with a band, or showcasing another song.\textsuperscript{34} There is a necessity to prepare for all outcomes because of this, and it poses a mental challenge. Should I be rehearsing everything I know? What skills do I need to improve? The list goes on. Students also have to audition on days where several other students will be waiting to go into the audition room.\textsuperscript{35}

Having gone through my own rounds of conservatory auditions, I distinctly remember being escorted to a practice room where I was able to see and hear several other students in the other practice rooms. It became almost impossible to prepare my own pieces because I was so entranced by the talent I could hear. This is also the case during regular school hours at the Music School. Although soundproofing is much more effective than traditional walls, it still does not block all of the sound.\textsuperscript{36} At a place like the Music School where only 32% of the talented students who audition get in, the level of talent heard from the hallways is truly impressive and intimidating.\textsuperscript{37} The nature of hallways being windowless negatively impacts the experience in conservatories. In a more traditional major you are not able to physically hear the capabilities of other students, so it elicits a different response. For example, seeing someone receive an A causes a much different feeling than hearing someone belt out an impressive note.

\textsuperscript{32} The Music School. 2017.
\textsuperscript{33} The Music School. 2017.
\textsuperscript{34} The Music School. 2017.
\textsuperscript{35} The Music School. 2017.
\textsuperscript{36} J. Star, Observation, November 1, 2016.
\textsuperscript{37} The Music School. 2017.
Therefore, there is a level of stress that conservatory students have to deal with on daily basis that is intense. It begs the question of how do we combat this, as this is the format of the performance career? In some ways, the rating system paired with the competition environment involved with being a performer can cause more distress than any other aspect of the profession.

**Competition:**

One of the other aspects of the Music School’s setting that contributes to mental distress is their ensemble rating system. Based on a separate audition during your first semester at the Music School you receive a rating that consists of five numbers such as 1-2-2-2 (2). The numbers in dashes signify specific skill levels and the final in brackets is your overall score. This determines what ensemble and some of the classes you are

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38 J. Star, Observation, November 1, 2016.
39 Tammying. 2011.
40 Tammying. 2011.
placed into, therefore, students continuously try to raise their scores to be accepted into better ensembles. The highest score someone can receive is an eight, and the lowest a one, and you are allowed to re-audition every semester. Students want to be placed in the better ensembles because those are the ones taught by the best professors, offer the most performance opportunities, and several other positives, so there is always a stress to do better so that you can be noticed in this tough setting. Whether it is to raise your ratings or for a performance opportunity there are always hundreds of auditions posted on the walls that students can peruse. These are some of the most novel ones I found throughout my ethnographic research:

The competition aspect of conservatories provides a severe level of mental distress that is not as prevalent in other school settings. In traditional schools there is still a form of rating system, but it does not impact the students in the same way. Students

41 J. Star, Observation, November 1, 2016.
receive a gpa, but it does not feel the same as having a score attributed to all aspects of your craft. Also, that even after hearing that you have been accepted to places as competitive as the Music School, you still have to risk receiving a score at the bottom of the range. Being at the Music School does not guarantee that you will be able to receive a top score, and therefore that will get you into the most competitive classes. This, in tandem, with hearing every student practice throughout the hallways creates an extremely competitive nature because there is always a score or person that you are trying to beat. There is also a stigma surrounding mental health that prevents students, and truly a majority of people, from tackling with their own mental health disorders.

**Stigma:**

As side aspect, this research poses the question of where do these stereotypes of the “tortured artist” even come from, and how much of this information has credible sources? It can be traced back to Vincent Van Gogh that there is believed to be some association between mental health and top tier artists, however that relationship has continued to baffle. It also begs the question whether art careers and mental health can be lumped into one category together as “tortured artists”, as there are so many nuances within each art field. There is research done on Vincent Van Gogh through the observation of his diary and old letters to his brother. These letters highlight the severity of his condition, and in that prove that it is far too extreme an association to make between his mental health and the distress he received as an artist.\(^{42}\) It is also imperative to bring up that Van Gogh was not popular during his life, so he therefore cannot be seen as a famous artist, as he was not treated as such. When we think about the stereotype of

the tortured artist, it is those who have reached fame and have struggled extensively in this transition. Vincent Van Gogh did not have this opportunity, and so the credible research done on his life becomes unrelated.

Although the reality of the life of Vincent Van Gogh is irrelevant, the perception matters because it provides the basis for the stereotype of the tortured artist. Van Gogh is considered the first artist to be attributed to this stereotype, partially due to his mental illness, but also his lack of success as an artist. There is something to be said for the impact that the tortured artist paradigm can have on newer performers, particularly conservatory students, and the function of the system. In some ways this mentality can bring about benefits to the institution as it places a level of commitment and “right of passage” by the students. It is considered extremely impressive if you make it through the conservatory paradigm, the pressure of teachers, auditions, mental illness, etc. and are still able to lead a successful life as a musician.\footnote{J.Star, Observation.} Also, with the prevalence of mental health triggers, in some ways struggling with the idea of being a “tortured artist” might be par for the field. Overall, the framing of the “tortured artist” is much more layered than appears.

Since the media advertises artists as perpetually in distress, the desire to break this belief can sometimes be more powerful than treating your condition. As mentioned earlier, my summer camp shunned those who struggled in public with mental issues, and similar can be said about the students at the Music School. Throughout the hallways I never saw one student visually express any negative emotions. A claim could be made that the students are actually happy, but I would be curious to ask them in an interview
format if this is actually true. Overall, there are several contributors’ to mental disorders in the Music School, but we still do not have the mechanisms to fully compare the evidence of it to traditional universities, this research simply provides a stepping-stone to that more extensive work.

**Conclusion:**

The conservatory, artist, and mental health paradigm is one that is still fairly misunderstood, and a two semester senior thesis is simply not enough time to uncover all the intricacies of it. Through this research I have been able to uncover possible implementations to the conservatory paradigm that could truly improve the mental health of its students in addition to those present. It is important to note that the Music School does already provide a lot of assistance to their students who struggle with mental health.

There are several types of appointments available for students through the “Health and Wellness Program” at the Music School, which provide options anywhere from

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individual meetings to dance therapy. These meetings are also publicized well throughout the halls, so students are aware of the measures they can take to assist their own mental health. Although this method is certainly beneficial, the addition of aspects I will highlight would further improve the health of students. As with any sociological research, one of the main goals is to help progressively transform the situation being studied, and my hope is this project will be used in this sense. It would have been advantageous to narrow this search to just improvements for conservatories as the information was leading itself to that conclusion. There is still much to be done in creating more mentally healthy forms of education.

Some of the methods that can be implemented to provide a more wholesome environment are looking into the architecture of soundproof rooms and therefore allowing more natural light. One of the main contributors to seasonal depression is lack of sunlight, and the nature of soundproof walls without windows allows this to happen more frequently. Other mechanisms of mental distress are stress and expectations, which as seen are rampant in conservatories, as the schedule allows for a competitive nature and lengthy days. A way this could be prevented is by keeping the same level of music standard, but professors having a stronger acknowledgement of potential stressors and how to manage them. This can take the shape of emphasizing the opportunity for improvement when someone receives a low score or does not get accepted into a particular ensemble. Also, further analysis into the format of a more standard institution could assist in creating a less rigorous experience.

There is a lot still to be learned by conservatories, especially when thinking about its relationship to a more traditional education. A typical university provides more
consistency when it comes to courses, homework, and extra curricular, whereas a conservatory education is more meant to copy the instability and pressure of a performance career. This means that rehearsals will go late, and as highlighted throughout this paper the expectations are high. Instituting some of these aspects of a university would assist mental health and provide a better student experience. However, by the same note, it would be difficult to institute this in a conservatory, as it would not prepare students for the field in the same manner. Also, “the survival of the fittest” mentality and pride with completing the program would not be as evident, which could provide an issue. A performance career requires a severe level of commitment through long hours, grueling rehearsals, and an extremely competitive job market. Changing the format of conservatories might impact how prepared students might be for this field.

There is still a lot to be discovered when it comes to what is the best form of education for mental health and the arts, while still providing the same level of learning.

This is a primary study on the relationship between mental health and conservatories, so there is still quite a lot to be uncovered. The connection is still not fully clarified, and further research needs to be unveiled to truly understand the intricacies of conservatories still present. Specifically, more research should be done on the percentage of students at conservatories other than Juilliard who experience mental distress; this done in tandem with observations of the rates in a traditional institution would provide further understanding of the comparison. Conceptualizing the relationship between mental health and conservatories is the first step in providing a healthier environment for prospective musicians and performers. As a past performer I can visualize the necessity
of this information being available, and will continue this work through future qualitative research.
Bibliography:


