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The culture of music education lends itself to abuse

Ian Pace studied piano, composition and percussion at Chetham's School of Music from 1978 to 1986, followed by Oxford and Cardiff universities and the Juilliard School in New York. He has a dual career as concert pianist and historical musicologist, and is lecturer in music and head of performance at City University London. He writes here in a personal capacity.

My own formative years, between ages 10 and 18, were spent at Chetham's - better known as Chet's - from 1978 to 1986, always as a boarder.

I should make clear from the beginning that I do not consider myself to have been a victim of sustained abuse at the school. I received a good deal of valuable teaching that helped towards my professional career as a pianist and musicologist. However, the recent conviction of one teacher and the police investigation of many others have forced me to re-evaluate those times, the values I encountered and absorbed there, and their relationship to a wider classical music culture.

Many among the alumni have come together in recent months, often for the first time in several decades, and frequently with the help of social media. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the conviction of one teacher and allegations against others have been traumatic for many. They have led to varying degrees of disillusionment, regret, sometimes denial or disbelief. There have been attempts to recapture the most positive elements of the past as an antidote to these shocks.

Hardest of all to accept can be the idea that those who played an integral part in shaping one's own musical identity and development - a deeply personal thing - may have themselves been deeply corrupted individuals responsible for sometimes heinous acts. An almost frantic piecing together of memories from the time can also give cause for sober reflection upon some aspects of the culture of the school.

In particular, there was the relatively common knowledge of affairs between (mostly male) teachers and (mostly female) students, the latter in most cases were over 16, but still students nonetheless. What sort of distorted values were at play when this was apparently not viewed as anything particularly unusual or untoward? From a youthful perspective, this seemed to bestow a certain status upon some of those involved (occasionally boys as well as girls) perceived as especially adult, sexually mature and sophisticated, despite still being children.

Many of the values and attitudes informing classical music today remain rooted in the 19th century. Among these is the idea that solo performance entails a highly intimate expression of the self, dealing with deeply intimate emotions. Or that it entails a seduction, captivation and bewitchment of one's audience, which can objectify performer and listener alike. Both place the musician in a vulnerable situation that can

be withstood from the vantage point of adult emotional and sexual maturity, but that is extremely testing and potentially dangerous for children.

And the focus of attention is not merely upon the sounds produced but also the visual appearance of the performer, their demeanour, gestures and facial expression. The outfits female musicians (and increasingly males as well) are expected to wear are often highly sexualised.

It would be disingenuous to deny that teenagers of all types, not just musicians, look to older, sexualised role models for inspiration, but when this becomes ingrained within their education itself, it can be ripe for exploitation. When music teachers take it upon themselves to mould not only the musician but the whole person of the young performer, that performer may be at risk of seriously damaging consequences if this is not handled with the utmost care. Most obviously alarming is the possibility of sexualised grooming, as is alleged to have happened in many cases at Chetham's.

But wider patterns of psychological abuse can equally have devastating results upon students' personal and emotional well-being, with severe consequences in later life. Behind the sometimes monstrous egos of successful solo musicians you frequently find common traits of narcissistic self-obsession, narrowness of outlook, ruthless competitiveness, vanity and the insatiable need for reassurance. They are all frequently conceived as aspects of "artistic temperament". Their higher calling seems to exempt them from other laws of reasonable behaviour.

Historical examples of musical "great men" such as Beethoven, Liszt or Wagner serve to legitimise these attitudes and traits. Many conflict sharply with the empathy, humility and generosity of spirit that I believe to be vital for productive teaching.

Yet many musicians are engaged as teachers primarily on the basis of their achievements as performers, and the result can at worst be disastrous. It can lead to the cultivation of entourages of adoring young students to be moulded into quasi-clones of the great guru, as extensions of his or her ego. Sometimes, students who do not conform to these teachers' expectations can be the subject of jealous resentment leading to callous cruelty through attempts to destroy their confidence. They dissect and amplify the student's every fault while ignoring their strengths, sometimes in order to humiliate them in front of others.

In either case this constitutes psychological abuse in a way that would be completely unacceptable for a regular state school teacher. But institutions' reputations are often founded on these "great musicians" and they have the power to make or break a student's future career. Students' desperation to please has for too long been allowed to mask a pattern of abusive behaviour.

