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The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI): should musicians care about it?

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American author and psychologist Isabel Briggs Myers (1897-1980) developed her well-known classification of personality types over an impressive sixty-years, during which she devoted herself entirely to the task of compiling and analysing data from thousands of surveys and individual studies, some of them conducted in challenging circumstances. Almost forty years after her passing, this classification is still being honed by modern-day research, a dynamic reflected in its growing impact on socio-economics. So why has it thus far been neglected by the classical music community? One interesting video on YouTube by the American violin duet 'TwoSetViolin', 'How the 16 MBTI Personality Types make music', amusingly offers plenty of scope for serious investigations of behaviour and interactions among classical musicians. Understanding their respective tendencies and needs could be very useful in dealing with a whole range of issues. Equally, individuals could benefit from the availability of critical data in terms of career choices; educators and instrumental teachers could implement better centered pedagogical methods; performing groups could maximise their team potential, and soloists and singers could sharpen their characterisations by better understanding their own personality type.

An obvious answer lies in the accepted belief that, for a classical musician, personality is not really a key ingredient. Musical children are usually plainly described as 'musical', in varying measures of awe depending on their precociousness. Professionals also tend to be construed as being one and the same: orchestral musicians are thus seen as team players and soloists individualistic. In popular music, however, personality types are part and parcel of what defines the genre: vocals, song-writing, choice of instrument, on-stage antics, dress sense, etc, all lend an air of carnival to the MBTI. Bands thrive on exacerbated tensions with their environment or from within, but orchestras or string quartets cannot function unless the different MBTI components are aligned, to some extent, to the will of a conductor or group leader; only then can the whole group sound greater than the sum of its parts. Although classical musicians could be regarded as more submissive since they bow to a greater will (the greatest being that of the usually dead composer), this does not mean that their own personality shuts down as they perform. How, then, do their dominant psychological traits manifest themselves?

For one, their third preference dichotomy listed in the MBTI, that of feeling (F) versus thinking, or analysing (T), should be less pronounced since their training is extremely analytical in developing a solid instrumental technique (leaving out those who are naturally academically inclined), while feeling is probably their dominant feature since making music is to an extent beyond our rational compass. The F function appears to prevail in other music-related activities, however: Anita Steele and Sylvester Young of Ohio University-Athens, USA, discovered that music therapy is most attractive to the INFJ type, while music teaching appeals to the extroverted strain of the same type (ENFJ), specifying that those adjectives (Introverted and Extroverted) refer to the "outlook on life" of those individuals rather than their behaviour (*Journal of Music Therapy*, Vol. 48, Issue 1 [Oxford, 2011], 55-73). For pianists, on the other hand, the amount of 'abstract' analytical data (ie.: musical notation) far exceeds its sensorial (ie.: tactile) counterpart, with greater emphasis on coordinating hand and feet movements than on the quality and substance of those movements, as is the case in string playing (vibrato, pressure, support) and singing. Until statistically proven by marked preference for music from T types, it is still the realm of the myth to say that classical music is a very mathematical subject.

Of course the primary concern in music performance, the ability to remain focused and communicative, would appear to be essentially linked to the crucial first dichotomy: extroverted vs introverted. 'I' types can nevertheless display extroverted thinking: INTJs or INTPs generally seek recognition (or appreciation at any rate) of their altruistic thinking. Paradoxically, 'E' types of classical musicians are just as likely to experience stage fright but may lack the resources to tackle it other than 'head-on' (not an easy strategy), whereas the 'I' type's natural compulsion to

think their way through a performance logically decreases their fear of memory lapses or their perception of external issues (heat, noise, visuals). These subtle shifts are not always clearly stated by stage fright 'experts' who tend to treat the subject in universal terms and deal with the individual's responses rather than highlight their susceptibility.

Perhaps the greater contribution of the MBTI to the future of music performance concerns pedagogy. Would it not be more human to engage, as instrumental teacher, with more child-centered psychology and, through an understanding of Myers-Briggs preferences, to determine a student's modus operandi? If a child has a gift for music but shows no extroverted tendencies whatsoever (INFJ springs to mind), should that child be expected to deliver on a violin, the most showy of all instruments? Conversely, is being locked behind a keyboard the right activity for an ESFJ (think of Jane Austen's Emma practising her scales)? As the authors of the above-mentioned paper on preferences in music therapists vs educationalists beautifully conclude, even a modest 'descriptive investigation (...) should help foster a stable task force in [our] profession.' Isabel Briggs Myers would have expected nothing less.