

Reconceptualizing Performance Spaces as Learning Environments in Music Education

Tianci Lu, Princeton University, United States

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Abstract

This paper proposes that music performance contexts involving live audiences can function as pedagogical environments that foster intrinsic motivation in students. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000), it argues that performance structured with three elements, authentic audience response, structured reflection, and teacher guidance emphasizing personal expression over competition, can support the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness necessary for intrinsic motivation. A pilot case study using a single-case exploratory design observed a 14-year-old technically proficient pianist over one year through teacher journals, parent discussions, performance videos, and participation logs. Initially demonstrating external motivation characterized by accurate but disengaged performances driven by parental expectations, the participant experienced a turning point when spontaneous mid-performance audience applause elicited a genuine smile. Subsequent teacher-facilitated reflection emphasizing joy over competitive achievement produced documented changes including voluntary practice initiation, increased emotional expressiveness, and parent-reported intrinsic fulfillment. While a single case cannot validate the framework, preliminary findings suggest performance contexts may support motivational development when structured educationally. The case aligns with Self-Determination Theory: audience recognition fulfilled relatedness needs while reflective reframing supported autonomy. Critical research questions are identified regarding generalizability across diverse learners, effective teacher reflection practices, and the differential effects of competitive versus collaborative performance formats.

Keywords: intrinsic motivation, music education, performance pedagogy, Self-Determination Theory, case study

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Introduction

Music education has long treated performance primarily as an assessment event, a moment in which students demonstrate technical mastery to evaluators. This framing, while productive for developing technical skill, overlooks a significant pedagogical opportunity. The relationship between a performer and a live audience, and the affective and motivational effects of that relationship, remains largely unexamined as a site of educational intervention.

This paper presents a theoretical framework and pilot case study proposing that performance contexts involving live audiences can function as learning environments that support intrinsic motivation when structured with appropriate pedagogical elements. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), the paper outlines three structural conditions necessary for this to occur and demonstrates their application through a single-case exploratory study conducted over one year with a 14-year-old pianist.

Theoretical Framework

The framework presented in this paper draws on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a well-established motivational theory developed by Deci and Ryan (1985) and extended in subsequent work (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT distinguishes between intrinsic motivation, engaging in an activity because it is inherently meaningful or satisfying, and extrinsic motivation, engaging because of external pressures such as grades, parental expectations, or competitive results.

Central to SDT is the proposition that intrinsic motivation depends on three basic psychological needs being fulfilled: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Autonomy refers to the experience of one's actions as self-determined and genuinely one's own. Competence refers to feeling effective and capable in one's activities. Relatedness refers to feeling meaningfully connected to other people within the context of an activity.

Applied to music performance, these needs are met unevenly in typical educational settings. Competence is reasonably well supported through feedback and visible skill development. Autonomy, however, is frequently undermined in competitive environments where external standards dominate, a pattern documented in research on competition and intrinsic motivation (Vallerand et al., 1986). Relatedness is almost entirely absent from how performance is pedagogically framed. Audiences are present but are not treated as having a function in the learning process.

This paper proposes that a live audience, when structured appropriately, can address all three needs simultaneously. The framework specifies three conditions: authentic audience response, meaning genuine real-time audience reaction rather than formal applause conventions; structured reflection, meaning guided post-performance conversation about the personal meaning of the experience; and teacher guidance oriented toward personal expression rather than competitive outcome.

Methodology

The study employed a single-case exploratory design (Yin, 2014), appropriate for investigating a novel framework in a real-world context where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined. The participant was a 14-year-old male pianist with several

years of formal training, selected because he presented a common motivational profile in advanced music students: high technical proficiency combined with clearly external motivation.

Data were collected over one year through four sources: teacher journals maintained throughout the observation period; discussions with the participant's parents conducted at intervals; recorded performance videos; and participation logs tracking practice frequency, duration, and self-initiation. This multi-source approach enabled triangulation and provided a detailed longitudinal record of behavioral and motivational change.

Results and Discussion

Baseline Motivation

At the outset of the observation period, the participant's motivation was clearly external. He practiced according to a fixed schedule maintained by parental expectation rather than by personal interest. His performances, while technically accurate, were emotionally disengaged. Teacher journals described performances as mechanically correct but lacking interpretive investment. Parent discussions confirmed that the participant experienced practice as an obligation rather than a chosen activity. This profile, technical proficiency without intrinsic motivation, is consistent with patterns documented in research on early intensive music training (McPherson & Davidson, 2006).

The Turning Point

During one observed performance, the audience responded spontaneously to a musical moment mid-piece, before the piece had concluded. This was not conventional end-of-performance applause but a genuine real-time reaction. The participant smiled involuntarily, a response visibly distinct from his typical stage demeanor. In the post-performance debrief, he described this as the first time he had felt something returned from an audience, as opposed to simply being observed by one.

The teacher's subsequent reflection session centered the participant's personal experience of the moment rather than technical feedback. The guiding framing was finding balance and joy on stage, not winning. This reorientation moved the evaluative frame from external performance standards to internal experience, directly supporting the autonomy dimension of SDT.

Documented Changes

Following this turning point, changes were documented across all four data sources. The participant began initiating practice independently, without parental prompting or a fixed schedule. Teacher journals recorded increased emotional expressiveness in performance and greater interpretive risk-taking. Parent discussions noted that the participant described music in qualitatively different terms at home and expressed anticipation of upcoming performances rather than treating them as obligations. Participation logs showed increased time at the instrument, greater variety in practice content, and more self-directed selection of repertoire.

These changes align clearly with the SDT framework. The spontaneous audience response addressed the participant's relatedness need by producing a felt sense of recognition and social

connection within the performance context. The teacher's reflective reframing addressed autonomy by shifting the evaluative reference point from external judgment to personal meaning. Competence was already established through prior training. The performance context, structured in the way it was, provided the two needs that lessons and practice rooms had not.

Conclusion

This paper has proposed a theoretical framework for reconceptualizing music performance as a pedagogical environment capable of supporting intrinsic motivation. The pilot case study provides preliminary evidence that the three specified conditions, authentic audience response, structured reflection, and teacher guidance toward personal expression, can interact to produce meaningful motivational shifts in individual learners.

Several significant research questions remain. Whether similar patterns emerge across diverse learner profiles, including students with lower technical proficiency or students who are already intrinsically motivated, is unknown. Which specific teacher practices most effectively facilitate structured reflection requires further investigation, as intuitive skill is not a replicable instructional procedure. How competitive performance formats interact with this framework, and whether the autonomy-undermining effects of competition are compatible with structured reflection, represents a particularly important question given the prevalence of competition in music education contexts (Vallerand et al., 1986).

A single case cannot validate a framework. What this case demonstrates is that the pattern is possible and that the framework is practically applicable. Systematic replication across diverse learners, teachers, and performance contexts would be necessary to establish generalizability. The present study offers a theoretically grounded starting point for that work and suggests that the time students spend in performance contexts may represent a significantly underutilized educational resource.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that no AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate, refine, or correct the content in the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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