

Giftedness, Self-Actualization and the Edge of Possibility

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Deep within a person there appears to be an enormous latent capacity, which in some, unfolds and takes on immense proportions that sets them apart and places them above and beyond the norm. This capacity, or potential, or giftedness, is in the process of actualization. The self-actualizing person touches something of the intangible, the greater whole, the immense, the profound. Like an unencumbered child at play, engrossed in what he/she loves to do, the individual is immersed in a work of love and experiences a state of 'flow'. When an individual experiences 'flow' all things are possible. Herein is the magic of 'giftedness' – its very essence, its wonder. We are taken to the very edge of possibility. Boundaries are reset, with the impossible becoming possible, the possible becoming probable, and that probability becoming actuality.

Musical giftedness is 'other-worldly'. It can transcend the ordinary. It can inspire. It can elevate thought to a loftier level. It can be a positive force in the world that can do much good. It therefore needs careful and respectful nurturing, as well as specialist training.

It is not without cause that the twentieth century was dubbed The Information Age. It was like a second Renaissance. Knowledge and skills developed at phenomenal rates in all endeavours. Major discoveries and breaks-through occurred in the Science and Health industries while the Arts and Humanities demanded attention in community as well as professional settings. Women became an integral part of the workforce and issues concerning the welfare of women generated much interest and activity. Computer technology enabled immediate access to information and communication links traversed the world in seconds. Economies bulged. Records and achievements proliferated and the pressure to achieve and excel increased. Education became a growth industry. Researchers compiled extensive information on how children learn and the most effective ways of teaching them. Reputable schools and distinguished colleges, universities and teachers were sought.

“Few Australians remained in Education after age 14 for most of the first part of the twentieth century. However, more than half of the 18 and 19 year olds, and the bulk of those aged between 14-17, were in education in 1996. In 1911 only 2,465 Australians were students in university, compared with 686,267 in March 1999.”¹

In U.S.A. John Meyer and Evan Schofer (2005) determined:

“ Participation in higher education has been growing at high rates in virtually every country in the world. In 1900, only about 500,000 students were enrolled in higher

¹ Graeme Hugo, A Century of Population Change in Australia, Feature Article in Year Book Australia, 2001 C4.31 Rates of Participation in Education in 1911 and 1996
<http://hdl.handle.net/2440/39153>

education... By 2000, the number of tertiary students had grown to approximately one hundred million people... The bulk of the growth occurred after 1960, in just the last four decades.”²

Despite the buoyancy of the growth and development following the two World Wars, there was an uneasy peace for the latter half of the twentieth century. Cold War tensions prevailed between the U.S.S.R. and U.S.A. and were significantly exacerbated by the launch of Sputnik I in October 1957. Americans were stunned by this unexpected Russian success and feared the U.S.S.R.’s possible technological supremacy. The United States Government was prompted to develop education policies that would raise standards in the nation’s schools, universities and research institutions. The “Space Age” now began in earnest.

“The launching (of Sputnik) by the Soviet Union in October 1957 undermined American claims to world leadership in science... It also led to fears that the Soviet Union had a massive lead in guided missile technology and that outer space could become an invulnerable Soviet military base from which the U.S.S.R. could control the world. This in turn led to America’s creation of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (N.A.S.A.) and propelled the U.S. – Soviet space race.”³

“ In the fall of 1957, the debate about American education reached a turning point. Sputnik resolved the debate in favor of those who recommended greater emphasis on higher academic standards, especially in science and mathematics.....After Sputnik the public demand for a federal response was unusually high and Congress passed the National Education Defense Act in 1958.”⁴

It was against this backdrop that a twenty-three year old Texan unassumingly took to the stage in Moscow for the first Tchaikovsky International Piano Competition and became a player in the Cold War. It was April 1958 and the pianist was Harvey Lavan (“Van”) Cliburn.

The distinguished jury for the competition included Kabalevsky, Richter, Gilels, Sir Arthur Bliss, Lev Oborin, to name a few, and was headed by Shostakovich. Their dilemma regarding the American’s superiority at the piano led them to approach Khrushchev, then leader of the Soviet Union, as to what decision should be made.

“Is he the best?”

And when answered in the affirmative, Khrushchev’s response was:

“Then give him the prize!”⁵

² John Meyer & Evan Schofer, The Worldwide Expansion of Higher Education in the Twentieth Century (2005)

cddrl.stanford.edu/people/publications/johnmeyer

³ Thomas S. Arms, Encyclopedia of the Cold War (Facts On File, Inc. N.Y. 1994) p.520

⁴ <http://www.nas.edu/sputnik/bybee2.htm>

⁵ http://azer.com/aiweb/categories/magazine/33_folder/33_articles/33_vancliburn.html

“...he (Cliburn) was little known when he won the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow in April 1958. It was six months after the launching of *Sputnik* and the U.S.A. was ready for a victory in Russia, even that of a classical pianist; when Cliburn came home, he was welcomed by a New York ticker-tape parade.”⁶

So what happened here? It is this writer’s opinion, that in the expression and actualization of Van Cliburn’s ‘gift’, he took his audience and followers to the edge of possibility! On the outer edge of the realm in which the drama of U.S.S.R. and U.S.A. relationships was played out, was a different possibility. The possibility was an experience of the greater whole, the immense, the profound. The young American experienced, that outside the parameters of accepted thinking, was a different world. Here, there was joy, not fear. There was warmth and admiration, not suspicion and distrust.

Musical giftedness is ‘other-worldly’. It can transcend the ordinary. It can inspire. It can elevate thought to a loftier level. It can be a positive force in the world that could do much good. It therefore needs careful and respectful nurturing, as well as specialist training. This statement is not intended to discount the value of an individual learning to flex spiritual muscle in the face of difficult life circumstances, but rather supports it. Van Cliburn reportedly expressed his concern for gifted young people this way:

“The possible peril that exceptional children face is that their natural wonder and oldness are in danger of being dashed by time and improper guardianship.

We should not aspire to create the virtuoso... We are not training a prodigy: we are nurturing a soul who instead will inspire us all.”⁷

Throughout the twentieth century, scholars in the U.S. held the torch for Gifted Education. By 1954 “The National Association for Gifted Children” was founded.⁷ It is interesting to note that the first edition of the book *Motivation and Personality* by the eminent psychologist Abraham Maslow was published in 1954. The book contained a revised and expanded version of:

“Self-Actualization: a study in psychological health.”⁸

A second revised edition of Maslow’s book was published in 1970. Shortly afterward, in 1972, the U.S. Commissioner for Education, Sidney P. Marland Jnr. submitted a report to Congress (The Marland Report) detailing how the educational needs of potentially high achieving students could best be met. The report defined gifted and talented students as:

⁶ Stanley Sadie, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Macmillan 1980) p.497.

⁷ Claude Kenneson, *Musical Prodigies, Perilous Journeys, Remarkable Lives* (Amadeus 1998) p.173.

⁸ A.H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (Harper & Row N.Y. 1954) pp.199-234.

“Those identified by professionally qualified persons and who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance.”⁹

The report identified six areas of possible achievement:

“General intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude, creative or productive thinking, leadership ability, visual and performing arts and psychomotor ability.”¹⁰

The time was now right for the Gifted Education Movement to step forward, as indeed it also was for the Women’s Movement. The latter found a powerful ally in the former. For the first time, gifted women as a collective, were being acknowledged and their work endorsed.

“The feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s was the driving force behind the emergence of a wide range of studies and theories centering on the lives, positions, and contributions of women in society through the ages. As in other fields, so in music, scholars began to show an interest in the work of half the world’s population that had been ignored in earlier studies of music history and development.”¹¹

Similarly, Stanley Sadie writes in the Foreward of *The New Grove Dictionary of Women Composers*:

“In the intellectual climate of the 1970s, the criteria governing the inclusion of women composers- those same criteria of supposed merit and prominence as governed the inclusion of men composers- seemed perfectly adequate; the increase since then in our awareness of women’s contribution, and, more particularly, of the failure of earlier historians (not excluding historians of contemporary music) to acknowledge it, to give it a sufficient context and to identify any specific elements of its character, justifies the present volume.”¹²

For purposes of this paper, young people who attain high academic results or who have an I.Q. of 130+, as well as those with exceptionally high I.Q.s and those demonstrating ‘prodigious’ abilities, are being collectively termed ‘gifted’. There is an assumption that young people demonstrating advanced (that is, above average) musical abilities in classical piano, have an appropriately high I.Q. namely, 130+ which registers in the gifted category. However, these young people do not *necessarily* have I.Q.s in the exceptional category as is the case with some academically gifted people. Based on the previously-mentioned assumption, issues regarding the nurturing and development of gifted young people in the academic field, are being applied in the musical field, in this paper. Very little research of the twentieth century was devoted to musical giftedness per se, rather it tended to be included in studies of prodigies in general. Musical savants, are not included in this discussion of ‘giftedness’.

⁹ <http://www.nagc.org/index.aspx?=60>

¹⁰ <http://www.nagc.org/index.aspx?=60>

¹¹ Karin Pendle, *Women & Music: A History* (Indiana University Press 1991) preface p.ix.

¹² Julie Anne Sadie and Rhian Samuel, *The New Grove Dictionary of Women Composers* (Macmillan 1994) Foreward p.vii.

For the latter part of the twentieth century, much interest was centred on the definitions of 'giftedness'. It is not this writer's intention to debate the definitions or to redefine, but rather to collate the existing definitions and draw from them significantly unique perspectives, that are potentially beneficial for the somewhat neglected field of Giftedness in Music Education. In addition, results from psychologists are included to give a fuller picture of the process of the actualization of potential.

One of the most popular definitions was that proposed by Joseph S. Renzulli (1978). He proposed that 'giftedness' was a conjunct of three identifiable characteristics:

1. Above-average ability
2. High creativity
3. High task commitment (his word for motivation) ¹⁴

In an attempt to be more precise and inclusive of other domains of excellence than academic ability, Francoys Gagné (1985) proposed a 'differentiated model of Giftedness and Talent' that had significant impact on educational processes. Giftedness - the ability domains or human aptitudes, he set out in the following categories:

1. Intellectual
2. Creative
3. Socio-effective
4. Sensori-motor
5. Other

Talent, the actualization of the giftedness or human activity, was experienced in the following fields:

1. Academic
2. Artistic
3. Interpersonal
4. Athletic
5. Other

He then proposed that a catalyst was needed to convert the 'giftedness' to 'talent'. The catalyst could be the family, the school or learning institution, a mentor, general environment or a combination of these. Integral to such, were the personality and motivation factors. ¹⁵

As pianists, we are fully aware and appreciative of the important role of the 'master teacher', indeed, the many teachers, and the renowned institutions that assist in bringing to professional fruition, a burgeoning musician. The personal and

¹⁴ Joseph S. Renzulli, What Makes Giftedness? Reexamining a Definition p.181.

¹⁵ Francoys Gagne, Giftedness & Talent: Reexamining a Reexamination of the Definitions pp.104-106.

professional integrity of the teacher working with young musicians, most often in a one-to-one environment, is of paramount importance.

John F. Feldhusen (1986) concluded that:

“Giftedness is a combination of general ability, self-concept and motivation that predisposes an individual to learn, to achieve, to strive for excellence.”¹⁶

Silverman (1993) states that:

“Giftedness has an emotional as well as a cognitive substructure; a cognitive complexity that gives rise to emotional depth. Thus gifted children not only think differently from their peers, they also feel differently.”¹⁷

She goes on to cite firstly Dr. Annemarie Roeper who proposes that:

“Giftedness is a greater awareness, a greater sensitivity, and a greater ability to understand and transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experiences.”¹⁸

and secondly, the Columbus Group, which concluded that Giftedness was:

“Asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different to the norm.”¹⁹

The eloquence of all these observations is particularly pertinent to the understanding of young gifted musicians. The never-ending quest for a flawless technique and execution, combined with artistic excellence under the heat of competition and/or performance, places great pressure on young performers. In addition, the penetrating insights and acute sensibilities required of the performing musician, are a significant demand on a young person. The emotionally advanced and mature responses that need to be elicited from the performer, are often beyond the years and experience of life of a young musician. Yet such are the manifestations of ‘giftedness’. Whether the stress of these demands can be maintained into a healthy and fulfilling adulthood, is another matter.

The kaleidoscopic perceptions presented by the mass of definitions of ‘giftedness’, raised further questions. Why did some achieve despite the most difficult and testing of circumstances? Why was it that others, despite many wonderful opportunities and brilliant successes in youth, failed to go further in adulthood? Was there a single determining factor for young people to continue on their path of illustrious achievements? Were there several factors involved, and if so what were they?

¹⁶ John H. Feldhusen, Conception of Giftedness p. 125.

¹⁷ Linda Kreger Silverman, The Gifted Individual p.3.

¹⁸ Silverman.

¹⁹ Silverman, p.4.

With questions such as these, studies in psycho-emotional health were, and still are, of extreme importance for gifted young people. From their earliest years, gifted young people undergo constant pressure to achieve. This is especially so for performers, who must maintain arduous workloads of learning new repertoire and contend with critical assessments and public approval or otherwise. The 'asynchronous' development previously mentioned, can produce difficulties for some of these young people. Their 'old musical soul' and their heightened emotional sensibilities allow them privileged insights and interpretations, but their very youthfulness and inexperience in the world necessitates living life and growing from their experiences. In doing so, they thereby eliminate the asynchronous disparity. However, while experiencing asynchronicity, the young person can feel compelled to withdraw socially, as the received information and stimuli is internalized and processed. The 'alone' time spent in individual practice, exacerbates the problem. Under such conditions, for some, it can be difficult to resolve complex emotional issues and to develop satisfying adult relationships that can be sustained in both personal and professional life.

A healthy self- concept and the ability to direct emotions in a productive and purposeful manner, is a positive solution. Daniel Goleman (1996) demonstrates the need for harnessing one's emotions to work towards the desired outcomes, rather than allowing a personal sabotage. Goleman calls emotional aptitude a '*meta-ability*'. He says:

“...people who cannot marshal some control over their emotional life fight inner battles that sabotage their ability for focused work and clear thought.”²⁰

The nature of giftedness is such that it will challenge the status quo demanding new consciousness, new rationale and new proclivities. The individual who is carving new pathways and has developed a healthy self-concept, will be more likely to succeed in the long-term with his/her creative endeavours. This is not to be confused with rebellion for its own sake, which is a destructive behaviour but rather change that generates growth and movement forward in a positive and sustainable direction. The gifted person, both young and old sometimes can be seen to break down resistance through force of will and personality. Prokofiev²¹ and Glenn Gould, the '*enfant terrible*'²² are two such people. They were definitive products of the twentieth century mind - brilliant, calculating, egocentric, motivated more by matters of the head rather than the heart.

It can be difficult at times, for anyone to handle criticism. However, it is extremely important for the gifted young person to learn how to handle criticism, especially in the demanding field of the classical arts, where traditions are respected and preserved. Likewise it is extremely important for adults working with gifted young people to deliver criticism that produces growth and not failure, criticism that motivates and not hinders, criticism that is delivered with discipline but not ridicule. How many dreams

²⁰ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (Bloomsbury London 1996) p.36.

²¹ Harold C. Schonberg, *The Great Pianists from Mozart to the Present* (Simon & Schuster 1963) pp.414-415.

²² Schonberg p.477.

have been abandoned because of too much opposition and rejection? How much talent and good has been lost to the world through one harsh word too many?

Yet, it is apparent, that some people go on into adulthood to achieve, despite the obstacles they encounter, or the criticism to which they are subjected. Such people appear to have an inner security, a sureness about themselves, their ideas and their life direction. Their work and their life are specifically and meaningfully connected. Work, for them, isn't about having a 'job' – work is part of who they are and the obstacles encountered are just part of the vagaries of life that indeed can test resolve but do not deter. Their spirit is indomitable. Goleman quotes Stanford psychologist, Albert Bandura:

“People’s beliefs about their abilities have a profound effect on those abilities. Ability is not a fixed property... People who have a sense of self-efficacy bounce back from failures...”²³

Linked to self-efficacy as described by Goleman, is another personality factor that the current writer believes to be essential for on-going achievement, and that is, self-referral. The ability to make creative decisions with a sense of choosing appropriately for oneself and the task at hand, is self-referral. This does not necessarily negate any advice that has been given, but rather, conclusions are formulated by means of an 'inner consultation' with or without advice or approval. Decisions of a creative nature certainly imply a trust in one's own judgements. An individual engaging in creative work tends to demonstrate emotional independence as well as autonomy of thought and thus, is in a process of self-referral.

This can be a delicate issue. For the gifted young person who has sat for years at the proverbial feet of mentors, master teachers and other significant people, the ability to enunciate and determine one's life strategies, as well as one's artistic and creative expressions, can be daunting, to say the least. In past generations, the subordinate role of women in society and professional life has, understandably, led to the difficulty for many women to be self-referencing. It comes as no real surprise to learn, that despite the achievements of her distinguished career, Clara Schumann was quite ambivalent about her creative work and often deferred to Robert.²⁴

An individual engaging in any creative endeavour must consult first and foremost with the artistic self. This inner consultation will only take place when there is sufficient self-knowledge and self-trust. The 'inner world' of the individual, must be able to sustain the creative personality while that individual manages possible criticism, financial insecurity, loss of intimacy (this has tended to be a difficulty more commonly experienced by girls)²⁵ and peer rejection or disapproval.

Concomitant with these personality traits, is *motivation*. A 'motivated' individual, it can be said, is an individual committed to the task at hand. However, a descriptive qualifying statement is necessary here. This task-commitment, is not a commitment

²³ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (Bloomsbury London 1996) p.90.

²⁴ Nancy B. Reich, *Clara Schumann The Artist and the Woman* (Cornell University N.Y. 1995) p.228.

²⁵ Miraca Gross, *The Pursuit of Excellence, or the Search for Intimacy?* (*Roeper Review* 1989).

that is induced by external pressures, such as parental, teacher or peer group pressure. Nor is it a commitment induced by fear, such as fear of failure. It is the commitment that is born of the individual's own volition and love for the work. Intense focus and concentration are poured into the work, while the individual, not minding the challenge of the workload, effortlessly sustains high energy levels. A strong sense of integrity, responsibility and authenticity are also brought to the work, as is a sense of respect for the culture and a willingness to assume the rigours of that culture.

Maslow's theory of self-actualization was a theory of *motivation*. The subjects of his theory were psychologically and emotionally healthy people. Maslow proposed that self-actualization was the peak of human needs. He states:

“A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself. What a man can be, he must be. He must be true to his own nature. This need we may call self-actualization.”²⁶

Maslow doubted that a child could be self-actualizing because there were not sufficient autonomous and independent behaviours available to the child. This might provide us with another clue as to the reasons for some gifted young people failing to continue on to further successes in their domain of excellence. That is, once autonomy, self-referral and independence became possible, the child, now an adult, makes a decision – a decision not to continue. For whatever reason, be it to avoid the constant pressure, to avoid repeated failure, to avoid the pressure of success, to avoid controlling adults, or simply to choose differently, an alternative career path becomes the choice. In another way, such a person can be said to be self-actualizing too!

Maslow's self-actualizers are self-starters; they are people who have worked out their beliefs and principles; they are ethically minded and responsible people with compassion for humankind; they are accepting of themselves, including their weaknesses; they are accepting of others, spontaneous and without affectation, part of a culture and yet ‘independent of enculturation.’²⁷

Maslow states that there is a profound difference between the self-actualizer and others:

“The motivational life of self-actualizing people is not only quantitatively different but also qualitatively different from that of ordinary people. It seems probable that we must construct a profoundly different psychology of motivation for self-actualizing people, eg. ‘metamotivation’ or growth motivation, rather than deficiency motivation.”²⁸

Self-actualizers don't ‘strive’, they ‘develop’. For them, ‘motivation is character growth.’²⁹

²⁶ A.H. Maslow, Motivation and Personality (Harper & Row Second Edition N.Y. 1970) p.46.

²⁷ Maslow, p. 171.

²⁸ Maslow, p. 159.

²⁹ A.H. Maslow, Motivation and Personality (Harper & Row 1970) p. 159.

The self-actualizing adult is like the unencumbered child at play, engrossed in what he/she loves to do. This total and complete immersion in the task is the state of 'flow' that elite performers in every field have access to. "Flow" is one of the hallmarks of prodigies as well as the self-actualizing adult. The authentic self is engaged in a work of love. In this state there is no thought of the outcome; there is no right or wrong; there is no fear or anxiety attached, there is no thought of current conditions or circumstances - there is only the deep enjoyment of the moment. When an individual experiences 'flow' all things are possible.

Herein is the magic of 'giftedness'- its very essence, its wonder. We are taken to the very edge of possibility. Boundaries are reset, with the impossible becoming possible, the possible then becoming probable, and that probability becoming actuality. A deaf Beethoven creates music; a fourteen year old nineteenth century girl completes the draft of her piano concerto, possibly a world first;³⁰ an unpublished composer, Prokofiev performs his own D flat Piano Concerto to win the Rubinstein prize for piano at the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1914.³¹ This explosion of energy is creativity and creativity is the unique expression or the actualization of the individual's potential. The great composers and pianists before us and indeed, those alive now, creating their own wonderful legends, have amazed us, dazzled us, and inspired us. Their lives are legends and their music our legacy, both of which inspire and motivate us to connect with our own capacity for creativity and self-actualization.

Maslow was aware of the 'methodological shortcomings' of his report on self-actualizing people, but he was also aware that his studies, 'so enlightening' for him, were 'laden with exciting implications'.³² It is this writer's opinion, that the upward thrust of the self-actualizing theory, makes it beneficial. The theory is not just about career and/or material success, as is often thought, it is about a way of being. There is a distinct spiritual component inherent in it, for it is about growing and evolving beyond lower levels of existence and consciousness (or lack thereof). It is about being a rounded and well-balanced adult while achieving all that one is capable of achieving. It is about a zest for living and compassion for humanity. It is about being psychologically and emotionally healthy. These are truly 'exciting implications' for gifted young people, as well as ourselves, as educators, involved in the process of the actualization of potential in our students.

About the Author

Suzanne is a freelance musician. She has contributed papers to numerous conferences including; The International Symposium on Clara Schumann (Vienna 1996), The National Women in Music Conference (ANU 2001), and The Winter Festival for Piano Teachers (Sydney Conservatorium of Music 2007).

Suzanne worked for many years with the NSW Gifted and Talented Children's Association. She has held the position of Head of Music at McDonald Performing Arts College, and has worked

³⁰ Clara Wieck Schumann, Piano Concerto in A minor op.7 (Breitkopf & Hartel Ed. Janina Klassen 1992).

³¹ Harold C. Schonberg, The Great Pianists from Mozart to the Present (Simon & Schuster N.Y. 1987). p.415.

³² A. H. Maslow, Motivation and Personality (Harper & Row N.Y 1970) p.149.

extensively assisting young people with the fulfillment of their potential. Suzanne maintains a private piano teaching studio and regularly performs.

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