

“The brilliance of perfection” or “pointless finish”? What virtuosity means to musicians

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journals.sagepub.com/home/msx**Jane Ginsborg**

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Abstract

The concept of virtuosity has been explored by music historians and theorists from disciplines ranging from aesthetics and anthropology to semiotics. Its history goes back to ancient times, although it is often thought to culminate in the 19th century with Liszt and Paganini. Many historical sources quote well-known performers and composers but little is known as to how music students and professional musicians define virtuosity today, and what it means to them as performers and audiences. The present study was exploratory, employing a mixed methods approach. A total of 102 musicians provided open-ended responses to a short questionnaire. A keyword-in-context analysis of content was undertaken, followed by a more in-depth thematic analysis. Five main themes emerged: characteristics of virtuosity; relationship between virtuosity and (“magical”) music making; aspirations towards virtuosity; how virtuosity is achieved; and communication. Responses from students and professionals were compared and are discussed with reference to historical and current theoretical models.

Keywords

aspirations, characteristics, exploratory, music making, thematic analysis

In a recent interview the pianist Murray Perahia reflected on his friendship with Vladimir Horowitz:

He told me at the very beginning, “If you want to be more than a virtuoso ... first you have to *be* a virtuoso,” so he advised me to go into quite a lot of Liszt, quite a bit of Rachmaninov, the repertoire that I had not known, and what I was stunned with when he played was the amount of colours, and that nothing was technical, in other words technique wasn’t even broached but it became a larger subject of life, of sounds, of colours and all kinds of things. (Rafferty, 2017)

The concept of virtuosity has been explored by music historians and theorists from disciplines ranging from aesthetics and anthropology to semiotics. Let us begin, however, with semantics. The earliest definition of the word “virtuoso” can be found in Sébastien de Brossard’s *Dictionnaire* (1703). It derives from the Italian *virtù*, “that excess of native endowment, of adroitness, or of

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proficiency which makes us stand out either in the theory or in the practice of the fine arts above others,” and was applied in particular to “‘*excellent musicians* ... who devote themselves to the *theory* or to the *composition* of music rather than to those who excel in the other arts’” (quoted by Pincherle & Wager, 1949, pp. 226–227; emphasis in original). More recent definitions can be found in Chambers 21st Century Dictionary (n.d.): “someone with remarkable artistic skill, especially a brilliant musical *performer*” and in Merriam-Webster (n.d.), “one who excels in the *technique* of an art” (emphasis added). Comparison of these definitions highlights several characteristics of virtuosity: it was once applied to theorists and composers but now applies to performers; it may be a gift and/or it may be trained; it represents excess and exceptionality; it refers to technique as well as art.

The history of virtuosity goes back to ancient times. The singers and players of Ancient Greece and Rome were the equivalent of the touring virtuosi of the 19th century, as were the singers and lutenists of Islam and musicians of the Middle Ages such as the Irish harpers, of whom Giraldus Cambrensis wrote in 1183 that “‘the supreme skill of their art seems to be that of concealing art itself’” (quoted by Pincherle & Wager, 1949, p. 229). Pincherle and Wager argue that composer-performers including Frescobaldi, Bach, Rameau and Couperin were well aware of the success that could be achieved by employing “‘charm plus velocity’” (1949, p. 229) and that the full flowering of 19th-century virtuosity, which so divided audiences and critics, was – in part – an outcome of the demand for music in which the increasing number of performers who were not themselves composers could display their skills. While such performers were caricatured as circus artists,

acrobats of the piano and violin [whose] public flocks to the lure of billboards and world renown, pays enormous sums, and beholds, in puerile wonderment and delight, feats which dazzle, and leave in their wake little more than a tingle of stupefaction. (Burk, 1918, p. 282)

Pincherle and Wager point out that virtuoso-hatred also goes back to ancient times, citing Cicero and St Augustine, among many others; it was fuelled by the antagonism between composers and performers illustrated in the writings of Guido d’Arezzo, Geminiani and Quantz. Schumann distinguished between music as expressive poetry, for example in his essay on Ferdinand Hiller’s *Twenty-Four Etudes*, op. 15 (published in the *Neue Zeitschrift* in 1835, cited by Stefaniak, 2016) and “‘the newer virtuosity [that] has contributed but little to the benefit of art’” (in a review of the violinist Bazzini published in the *Neue Zeitschrift* in 1843, quoted by Stefaniak, 2016, p. 1). Similarly, Wagner contrasted the virtuoso who “sits ... in the concert-hall, and entrances purely for himself: here runs, there jumps; he melts, he pines, he paws and glides, and the audience is fettered to his fingers” (1840/1898, n.p.) with the “true, great artists [who] owe their reputation to their moving execution of the noblest tone-works of the greatest masters” (1840/1898, n.p.). The powers of both Liszt and Paganini were attributed to the devil:

The Paganini of biographical data was a charlatan in every sense. He was uneducated and immoral, he spread reports of his league with the devil because they brought him fame and riches, he cultivated mannerisms in his playing, and, in all but his own compositions, showed a sad lack of musical taste ... The complex character of Liszt makes another story than this. (Burk, 1918, p. 285)

Although Schumann reported “the demon’s power [beginning] to awake” when Liszt played a recital in Dresden in 1840:

He first played with the public as if to try it, then gave it something more profound, until every single member was enveloped in his art; and then the whole mass began to rise and fall precisely as he

willed it. I have never found any artist, except Paganini, to possess in so high a degree as Liszt the power of subjugating, elevating and leading the public. (Williams, 1990, p. 123, quoted by Larkin, 2015, p. 195)

Anti-virtuoso feeling and prejudice against virtuosity for its own sake culminated in the “War of the Concertos” in the early years of the 20th century; Burk’s *The Fetish of Virtuosity*, quoted above, is an example of a rallying cry against all but “one or two [concertos] of Beethoven, Schumann, or Brahms” (1918, p. 285). Satie is perhaps an extreme example of an anti-virtuosic composer: in 1917, while he was composing *Socrate*, he wrote “Let us mistrust Art: it is often nothing but virtuosity” (quoted by Orledge, 1990, p. 69). Towards the end of the 20th century, however, Berio nodded to both pro- and anti-virtuosity positions, saying (in relation to his *Sequenzas*), “I hold a great respect for virtuosity even if this word may provoke derisive smiles and even conjure up the picture of an elegant and rather diaphanous man with agile fingers and an empty head” (Berio, 1985, p. 90, quoted by Halfyard, 2007, pp. 114–115).

Discussing the development of virtuosic composition in the 18th and 19th centuries, Till (2003) examines the concept of virtuosity as mastery. The *fioratura* characteristic of 18th century opera, for example in Handel’s *Partenope* (1730), portrays strong emotions under the control of the performer; by contrast, the coloratura of the Queen of the Night’s arias in Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte* (1791) is mere empty, mechanical display. In the 19th century virtuosic control gave way to spontaneity and expressive freedom, although Liszt rejected the association between virtuosity and feminine hysteria, emphasizing its virility and thus reclaiming mastery as a central feature of virtuosity.

The anthropologist Anya Royce describes virtuosity as “the masque of nonchalance” (2004, p. 18) and quotes a panel discussion on the topic: “All agreed that virtuosity is bad when it is an end in itself and that it is good and necessary when it is a foundation for serving the art” (2004, pp. 18–19). In her examination of assumptions arising from Paul Valéry’s observation that a work of art is ““a check drawn against the talent of a potential performer ... the virtuoso is by definition an executant of unusual abilities, who may now and then, intoxicated by an exaggerated sense of his technical powers, allow himself to abuse them”” (Valéry, 1964, pp. 193–194, quoted by Royce, 2004, p. 21) and thus that “there can be any number of equally virtuosic performances or realizations” (Royce, 2004, p. 21), Royce addresses four ways of thinking about virtuosity:

1. ... that component of a paradigm for aesthetics that focuses on technique rather than style and that is a necessary step towards artistry
2. ... the mastery of certain extra-technical elements common across genres (dynamic variation, agogic or rubato phrasing, sustaining of a phrase, and economy)
3. ... the manner or level of execution of a particular technique that defines a genre
4. ... an attitude – nonchalant, self-critical, limiting. (Royce, 2004, p. 23)

Monteiro, meanwhile, argues that virtuosity should be understood in terms of Promethean sacrifice and Orphic seduction. The sacrifice is that of the virtuoso as circus performer, whose “blood is symbolized by the conflict between the performer and his physical limitations, or between the performer and the exigencies of the music he’s supposed to play; or ... by the conflict between performer and instrument” (Monteiro, 2007, p. 317). Orphic virtuosity reveals the sublime, either when “a performance seems to be a unique moment of communication, an exceptional symbiosis of the subject (the public), the performer and the context” or via “expressive ecstasy ... the astonishment in face of an overwhelming emotional moment” (2007, p. 317).

Hennion's primary focus is virtuoso jazz performance. Quoting Rameau's formula "'to hide art by very art'" (2012, p. 127; in a letter dated 1827 published by *Le Mercure de France*, 1865), which echoes the 12th-century Giralduus Cambrensis, Hennion emphasizes a further dualism, that of simultaneously concealing and revealing. "The paradox of virtuosity," he writes, "is that it aims to posit something about the 'spirit of skill'; it suggests a *part of the truth that exists in mechanics*" (2012, p. 127; emphasis in original). He contrasts the aspect of the virtuoso that is like a magician with that which is like an automaton – illustrated by the doll Olympia in Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffman* (1881), surely a descendant of the Queen of the Night – observing the closeness of virtuosity and improvisation, in which risk-taking is essential:

If [sequences of breathtaking virtuosity] hint at too much sweat, if they seem too prepared, and if they give the impression of having been heard a hundred times, they rapidly lose their charm, dwindling to nothing short of pointless exercises. Furthermore, the speed that defines virtuosic quality is bound to be looked down on as soon as one becomes afraid of affording it too much importance. (2012, p. 128)

Rationale and aim

Although well-known performers and composers are quoted in many of the sources cited above, there is a dearth of literature on how virtuosity is defined by music students and professional musicians today, and what it means to them. Monteiro (2007) subtitled his paper "Some (quasi phenomenological) thoughts" (p. 315) and calls for empirical as well as theoretical research to be undertaken. The present article is a response to that call. The aim of the study was, essentially, exploratory: to survey musicians primarily but not exclusively engaged in the training of Western classical music as either students or tutors, for the purpose of soliciting their views on virtuosity.

As described in the Design sub-section of the Methods, below, the methodological approach that was adopted for the study was both qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative researchers must acknowledge and reflect on the inevitable subjectivity that guides both the questions they ask and their interpretation of the data they gather (Wellington, 2000). My questions were shaped, inevitably, by my own experience as a professional singer, listener, teacher and music psychologist. I was also influenced by my early acquaintance with the writings of Satie, to which I was introduced by my first piano teacher, Stuart Thyne (1916–1992). Thyne was himself a composer of somewhat austere music for young pianists, and an expert on Bartók (e.g. Thyne, 1950); it is not surprising that I developed a distrust of virtuosity *per se*. This distrust has come to be combined with huge admiration for those who dazzle with so little apparent effort, and while I gain enjoyment from their skill, I also take pleasure in finding that so many students and colleagues clearly share my views on the pre-eminence of music making whether or not apparently virtuosic. The final paragraph of Burk's call to arms, addressed to pianists, expresses sentiments I can't help but share:

The beginning and end of musical development is not technique but natural impulse, and if you have not the impulse at the start, technical training will never bring it to you on this side of heaven. While piano technique is as necessary as the routine which accompanies every human activity, if you have not the self-assertion and imagination to make it your liberator, to make skill a matter of second thought that you may freely explore your marvelous chosen field, if technique becomes not your humble tool but your master, then you had far better make no beginning, for your worth as a musician and artist is nil. (Burk, 1918, p. 292)

Method

Design

The study employed a mixed methods approach involving a concurrent embedded strategy (Creswell, 2013). The primary method guiding the project was qualitative, insofar as open-ended responses to a very short online questionnaire were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006), as described by Van den Tol and Edwards (2013) in their study of listeners' reasons for choosing sad music. The secondary method was quantitative, enabling descriptive comparison of the responses of professional and student musicians. Quantitative methods were also used in the preliminary analysis of data to generate codes, and to help organize the reporting of the qualitative findings.

Respondents

There were two phases of data collection: 1) during the winter of 2015–2016 when the link to the questionnaire was sent via email to students and staff at a single UK conservatoire of music, with ethical approval from its institutional research ethics committee, and 2) during the winter of 2016–2017 when the link was circulated more widely via the networks of Conservatoires UK (CUK) and the European Society for the Cognitive Sciences of Music (ESCOM), with ethical approval from the CUK Research Ethics Committee.

A total of 102 respondents completed the questionnaire. Sixty-eight were students (35 male, 33 female) aged 18–54, with a median age of 21. Forty-six were from the UK and the remainder from Australia, Canada, China, Cyprus, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Romania, Russia, Singapore, Spain, Sri Lanka, USA and Uruguay. Twenty-four were string players including four electric and three bass guitarists; there were 19 pianists, 13 singers, five brass players, three flautists and two composers. Thirty-two respondents were professional musicians (17 female, 15 male) aged 27–87, with a median age of 53. All but two had studied in the UK. There were nine string players, eight pianists, eight woodwind players, three brass players, two singers, two conductors and a composer. Two respondents did not provide any data about themselves.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was hosted by SurveyMonkey® and consisted of 10 questions, five of which sought demographic data. The substantive questions were as follows:

1. How would you define virtuosity in music performance?
2. What does virtuosity mean to you?
3. To what extent do you aspire to be, or teach others to be virtuoso performers?
4. How do you go about becoming or teaching others to become a virtuoso performer?
5. How do you view the relationship (if any) between virtuoso performance and what might be thought of – or described as – “magical”, “enchanting” or “transcendent” music making?

Analyses

There were 504 valid responses to the five substantive questions (i.e. 98.8% of the possible total), producing 13,202 words in all. Responses ranged from one word only to as many as 178, although professionals submitted longer responses, on average ($M = 145.3$) than did students ($M = 125.78$).

First, a content analysis of students' and professionals' responses to each question, respectively, was conducted using a keyword-in-context (KWIC) approach (Luhn, 1960). This was modelled on the approach used by Alessandri (2014) to explore the development over time of the concept of "expression" in music performance, for music critics and listeners alike. Alessandri used a corpus of 839 reviews of recordings of Beethoven piano sonatas published in *The Gramophone* between 1923 and 2010 as her dataset. Using the manual KWIC procedure described by Namey, Guest, Thairu, and Johnson (2007), Alessandri identified all 168 occurrences of the word when relevant to the performance being reviewed. She clustered them into four categories and analysed them to show how "expression" has been seen at different times as a positive quality or a negative characteristic of performance. In the present study, the words "virtuoso", "virtuosity" and "virtuosic" were removed from the dataset, as were words of three and fewer letters, and words that appeared only once. The remaining text was entered into a free word-cloud program (<http://www.worditout.com>) in which the words used most often appear largest. The word-clouds formed a basis for the word counts reported below. An initial comparison was made between the word-clouds produced for each question by students and professionals respectively. If no differences had been obvious the two groups would have been considered as a single cohort. The findings reported below, however, suggested that it would be worth exploring potential differences between students' and professionals' views on virtuosity, as expressed in their full responses.

Second, a thematic analysis of full responses was conducted. For the purposes of assigning first-level codes and higher-level themes, respondent status (student/professional) was disregarded initially. The analysis was conducted using the six stages recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006): (i) familiarization with the data; (ii) generation of initial codes; (iii) search for themes; (iv) review of themes; (v) definition and naming of themes; and (vi) report writing. The analysis was organic, involving a back-and-forth rather than linear process. For example, a first set of codes was generated for each response to each of the five questions separately. In the course of undertaking this exercise it became clear that some respondents had not distinguished between Questions 1 ("How would you define virtuosity?") and 2 ("What does virtuosity mean to you [i.e. personally]?"), and Questions 3 ("To what extent do you [i.e. personally] aspire to be, or teach others to be virtuoso performers?") and 4 ("How do you go about becoming or teaching others to become a virtuoso performer?"). Accordingly, a second set of codes was generated for Questions 1–2 (combined), Questions 3–4 (combined) and Question 5. Next, responses for the five questions were combined into a single dataset, and a final set of codes was generated. These were then clustered into 24 sub-themes and five higher-order themes. When this phase of the analysis had been completed, a comparison was made between the contributions of students' and professionals' responses to each theme.

Third, a reliability check was carried out using the approach described by Ginsborg and King (2012). A musician colleague of the author independently assigned one or more of the 24 sub-themes to each of 50 responses, selected randomly (seven from students and three from professionals for each question). This process produced 70 statements to which 19 sub-themes were assigned. These were checked against the sub-themes independently assigned by the author to the same statements. Inter-rater reliability was calculated via SPSS v.24 using Cohen's *kappa* (0.801, $p < .0001$); disagreements were subsequently resolved in discussion. The author then completed the analysis of the whole dataset that is reported below.

Results and discussion

Content analysis

The keyword-in-context analysis of data showed broad similarities between the students' and professionals' responses to Questions 1 and 2 ("How would you define virtuosity in music

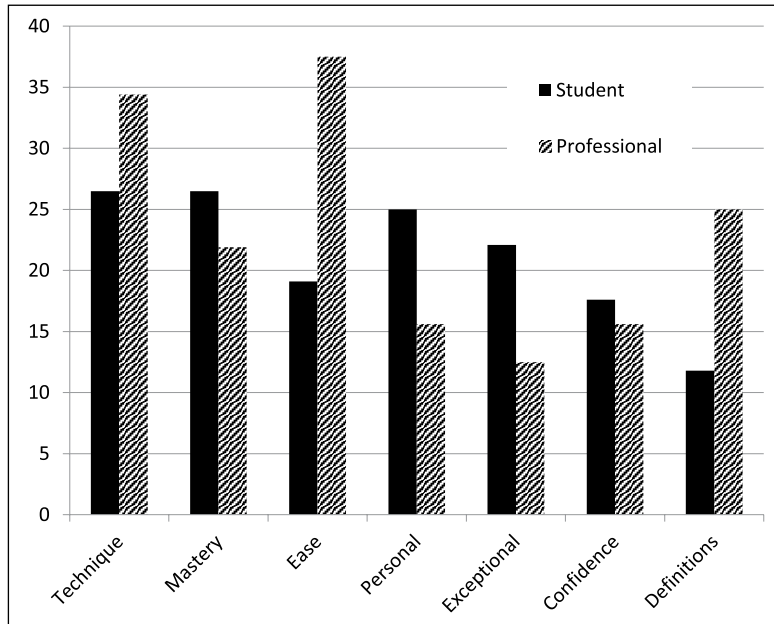


Figure 1. Characteristics of virtuosity – percentages of respondents contributing to each sub-theme.

performance?” and “What does virtuosity mean to you?”), as shown in the Appendix: “technical” and “technique” were the most frequently-occurring words in responses to both questions. Some differences were evident in the two groups’ responses to Questions 3 and 4 (“To what extent do you aspire to be, or teach others to be virtuoso performers” and “How do you go about becoming or teaching others to become virtuoso performers?”). For example, discounting words occurring in the question, the most frequently-occurring word in the students’ responses to the first was “able” and the second was “practice” or “practise”, while “technical” and “technique” were still those occurring most frequently in the professionals’ responses to both questions. Finally, the most frequently-occurring words in the students’ and professionals’ responses to Question 5 (“How do you view the relationship (if any) between virtuoso performance and what might be thought of – or described as – “magical”, “enchanted” or “transcendent” music making?”) were “music” and “performance”.

The content analysis was, of course, relatively superficial; nevertheless the finding that students mentioned “practice” or “practise”, in relation to becoming or teaching others to become a virtuoso performer, three times as often as professionals (68 student responses/43 occurrences vs. 32 professional responses/7 occurrences, or 63.2% vs. 21.8%) suggested that it would be worth exploring potential differences between students’ and professionals’ views on virtuosity as expressed in their full responses. These results are illustrated in Figures 1–5 below.

Thematic analysis

The five main themes, and their respective sub-themes, are presented, for the most part, in order of the numbers of respondents contributing to them, from largest to smallest. The two most prominent themes, *Characteristics of virtuosity* and *Relationship between virtuosity and (“magical”) music making* were derived from 155 and 148 responses respectively. Many, but not all of these were responses to Questions 1 and 2, “How would you define virtuosity in music

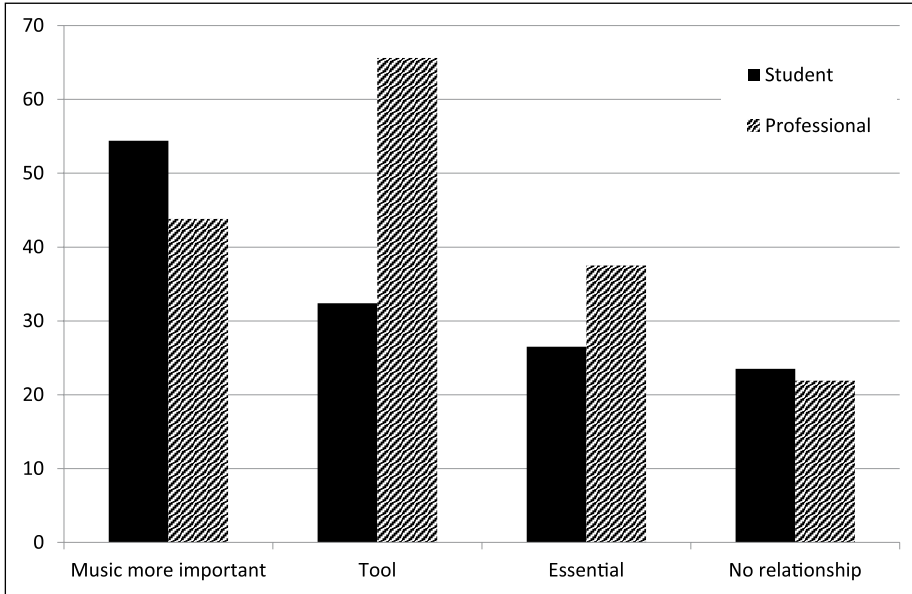


Figure 2. Relationship between virtuosity and (“magical”) music making – percentages of respondents contributing to each sub-theme.

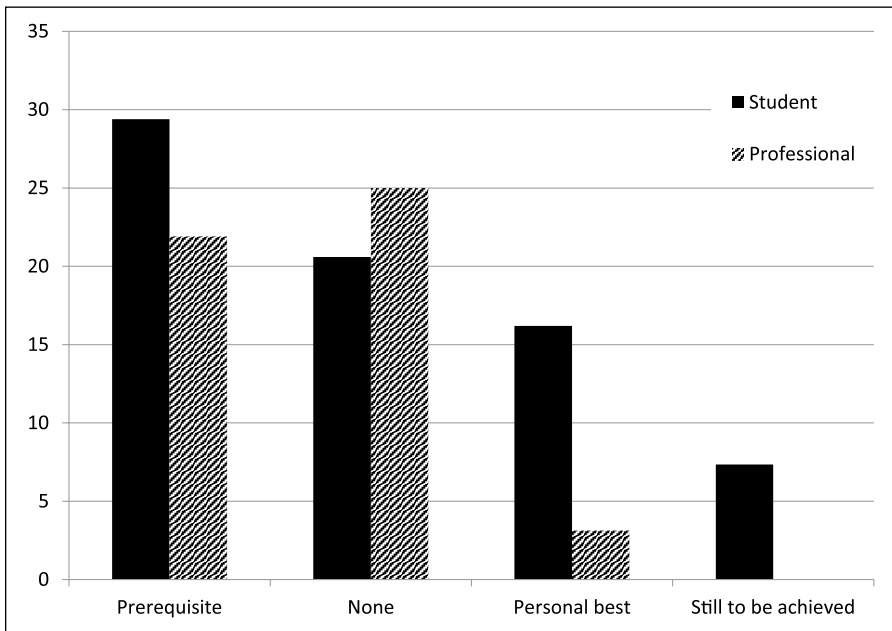


Figure 3. Aspirations towards virtuosity – percentages of respondents contributing to each sub-theme.

performance?"; "What does virtuosity mean to you?" and Question 5, "How do you view the relationship (if any) between virtuoso performance and what might be thought of – or described as – ‘magical’, ‘enchanted’ or ‘transcendent’ music making?"

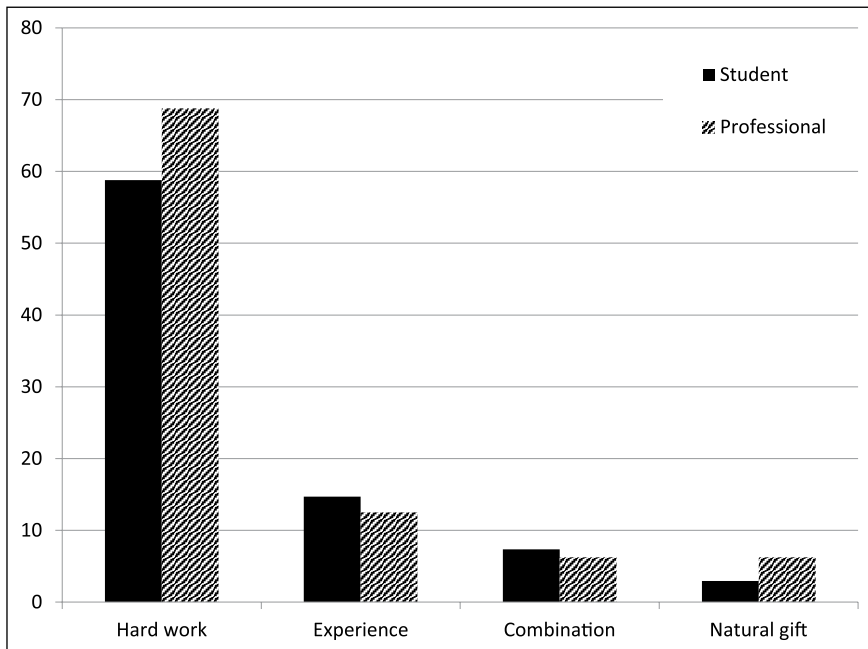


Figure 4. How virtuosity is achieved – percentages of respondents contributing to each sub-theme.

Characteristics of virtuosity

Technique. A higher proportion of professionals (11/32 or 34.4%) than students (18/68 or 26.5%) considered the principal characteristics of virtuosity to be “flawless” technique, technical ability or brilliance, demanding perfection, skill and speed, without reference to music making. For example, one professional described virtuosity as “fingers flying through difficulties” (viola player). Another professional, also a viola player, confessed (perhaps conscious of the history of virtuosity, and definitions such as the one quoted above from the Merriam-Webster dictionary): “I struggle with the term as it refers to technical brilliance, much as it did in the 19th century.” A third professional, as though echoing Schumann’s 1843 review of Bazzini cited above, distinguished between virtuosic and expressive performance: “Virtuosity means the ability to play fast music faster than anyone else – the abandonment of expressivity – a combination of physical and mental activity” (violinist and conductor). A simpler definition was provided by a student: “vast technical skill on any given instrument. Referred to as ‘chops’” (electric guitarist).

Mastery. Physical mastery, command and control were highlighted by slightly more students than professionals (26.5% and 21.9%), reflecting Till’s (2003) characterization of virtuosity as mastery, particularly in the 18th-century sense of control. Typical comments by students included: “complete control over technical aspects of the performance” (tuba player), “complete technical control of the instrument, pushing it to the limits of its capabilities” (French horn player), illustrating Monteiro’s (2007) notion of the Promethean sacrifice. Another focused on more specific requirements: “finger effectiveness, sound control, and body stamina while playing a technically demanding or structurally complex or texturally thick piece of music with very high accuracy.” In one of only two references in the whole dataset to memorization, the

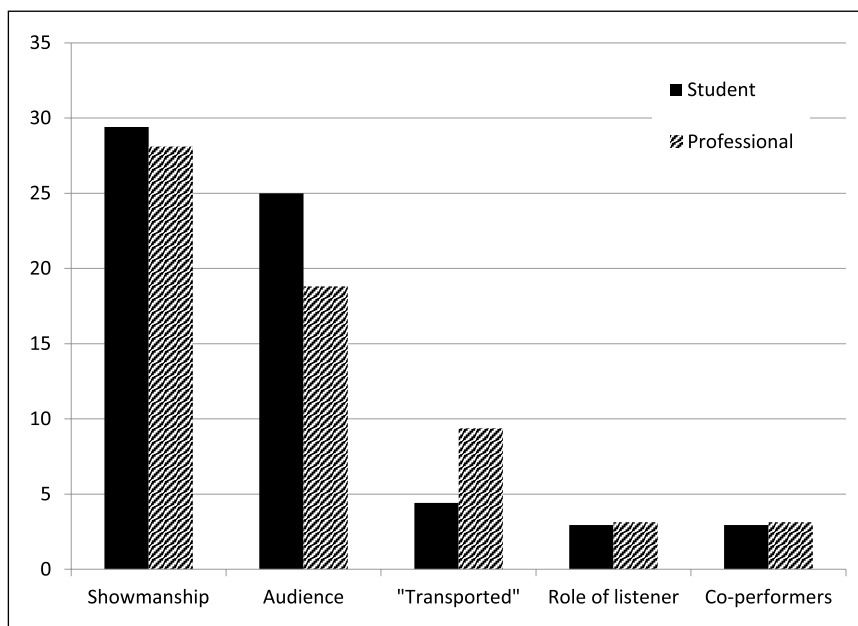


Figure 5. Communication – percentages of respondents contributing to each sub-theme.

same respondent continued: “However the music does not necessarily need to be memorized” (pianist). A professional double bass player wrote, “I teach my students to ... have control over their sound, their expression, their instrument and the practice that it takes”.

Ease. A higher proportion of professionals (37.5%) than students (19.1%) referred to the ease, effortlessness and/or, above all, the spontaneity to which Till (2003) refers as a feature of 19th-century virtuosity. This can be apparent or actual: “playing with *élan*, without apparent effort and with a level of physical ease where technique appears easy and natural” (professional conductor/cellist); “a feeling of easiness ... technically difficult passages being performed with delight” (student pianist). The reconciliation of technical ability and expressive musical interpretation was encapsulated as follows: “Musical understanding and technical ease which conveys fully fluent, creative and original interpretive ideas” (professional flautist).

Personal expression. Students were more likely than professionals to focus on personal expression as a characteristic of virtuosity (25% vs. 15.6%), as suggested by Royce’s (2004) interpretation of Paul Valéry’s view that there is no single virtuosic performance. Responses included: “Personal interpretation of a given work performed in a wholly committed, dynamic way” (student baritone); “the ability to form independent (and potentially unique) musical ideas in performance, as well as define your own ‘sound’” (student soprano); and “technical facility, artistry, personal ownership of the music” (professional pianist). These characteristics link with the authenticity valued by audiences, illustrated in the theme of communication, below.

Exceptional. Similarly, students (22.1%) were more likely than professionals (12.5%) to consider virtuosity the province of outstanding, exceptional performers. A student cellist was perhaps thinking of virtuosos such as Paganini and Liszt when he wrote, “beyond what you thought

was humanly possible ...". Meanwhile one of the professionals, a teacher of physical and mental awareness, commented more prosaically: "transcends typical standards of achievement at a given level."

Confidence. Students (17.6%) and professionals (15.6%) tended to agree on the role of confidence and the ability to take risks in performance, as observed by Hennion (2012): "to perform with virtually no nerves in a stylish and extrovert manner" (professional oboist). The teacher of physical and mental awareness quoted above defined virtuosity and reflected on how it might be achieved:

[Virtuosity is] the ability to take risks and produce new and exciting outcomes within the parameters of the piece i.e. staying true to the composer's wishes but being able to add a new dimension to it ... by fostering an environment conducive to exploration and embracing the concept of vulnerability ... "Go for it" "What's the worst thing that can happen?"

Definitions. Finally, a small proportion of students (11.8%) and a slightly larger proportion of professionals (25%) confined themselves to simple definitions, such as that of a student bass player: "being r8 good" [*sic*: "being right (i.e. very) good"]. A student cellist, reminding us of Perahia's report of Horowitz's playing, quoted at the beginning of this article, defined virtuosity as "a colour, just like *expressivo* or *legato*". A range of views were elicited from the eight professional musicians. One, a trumpet player, wrote just one word: "Happiness." Another, a conductor, echoed Satie (as quoted above in Orledge, 1990): "I'm afraid it has a negative connotation – I often think of the phrase 'empty virtuosity.' I associate it with people who are superficially attractive but shallow. But this is just my knee-jerk response."

While many student respondents saw virtuosity in a positive light, negative personal experiences were reported by two respondents. One was a violinist and conductor in his 80s, the oldest respondent to the survey: "Nothing but disappointment and sadness." The other was a professional pianist and teacher of young musicians: "The sacrifice of a lost childhood, then giving up performing whilst at GSMD [Guildhall School of Music and Drama] because I realized I didn't want that which I'd worked so hard to achieve." We will revisit this comment when considering respondents' aspirations towards virtuosity, below.

Relationship between virtuosity and ("magical") music making. As Picherle (1949) wrote, "There can be virtuosity without music. There cannot be, and there never could have been, music without virtuosity" (p. 243). Some respondents agreed; others' views could be described as more nuanced.

Music more important. According to 52.9% of student respondents and 46.9% of professionals, "musicality is far more important" (student tuba player) than striving for what several respondents described as "technical perfection". Students' comments included, "I would much rather play musically and teach others the same, and listen to performers that are musical, as opposed to giving a technically flawless performance devoid of any musical feeling or expression" (violinist) and "my main goal is to create emotional performances rather than technical preciseness" (pianist). Teachers expressed similar aspirations:

I think my primary aim is to instil a love of music, and nurture that towards the development of excellent playing ability, with performance skills like overt virtuosity being "the cherry on top" when/ if appropriate for each particular student. ... I hope that the true meaning of virtuosity encompasses

deep musical understanding, mastery of one's instrument and confident, seemingly effortless stagecraft. (professional pianist)

Both students and professionals reflected on their experiences of listening to "magical" performances: "I think a performance can be thought of as magical and give someone 'shivers', etc. without being played by a virtuoso" (student cellist); "I taught a course on practice and performance techniques the other day and was moved to tears by the emotional intensity of a performance by a grade 4 violinist" (professional double bass player). Here we see Schumann's distinction

between "poetry in music", of the sort that he wrote about as a critic and composed as a musician, and ... virtuosity [which was] jeopardized by the danger of degenerating into the prosaic ... by flaunting the opposite of the "poetic", namely, the "mechanical". (quoted by Dahlhaus, 1989, pp. 144–145)

Tool. Like the members of the panel on virtuosity cited by Royce (2004), a larger proportion of professionals (65.6%) than students (30.9%) emphasized the pre-eminence of music making over the display of technical accomplishment: virtuosity as a tool. One professional defined virtuosity as "technical prowess in the service of musical expression" (clarinettist), both concealing and revealing (Hennion, 2012). Another argued that "a performance that is merely technically brilliant may as well be performed by a robot" (viola player), reminding us of Hennion's reference to Offenbach's *Olympia*. More specifically, a professional cellist summarized the relationship between virtuosity and "what might be thought of – or described as – 'magical', 'enchanted' or 'transcendent' performance" as follows:

For me, even the most impressive virtuosic performances would hardly count as transcendent music making; transcendent music making should rather overshadow the physicality of what the performer is doing, and should direct the listener and his imagination only to the musical impulse.

Students' comments echoed those of the professionals. One pianist commented, "virtuosity is a means not an end". Another observed, "As long as technique 'serves' musical ideas; a performer should not indulge in playing fastly and loudly just for the sake of doing so or because one is able to". A bass guitarist suggested that "the virtuoso takes a piece and reveals details within a performance that an average performer could not", while a cellist claimed that "purely technical playing is nearly meaningless".

Essential. The view that virtuosity is inseparable from and indeed essential to "magical" music making was expressed by 37.5% of professionals and 25% of student respondents. Professionals' responses included: "I view this relationship to be absolutely entwined" (viola player); "I think 'virtuoso' and 'transcendent' are interchangeable" (pianist); "There is no distinction" (guitarist); "It's intrinsic" (trumpet player). A composer vividly illustrated the relationship between virtuosity and music making: "A meeting point of technical knowledge and acumen, high quality craftsmanship, innovative interpretive skills, and profound insight into the music being performed; welded to the ability to communicate those things." Several students took the same stance: "They're the same thing" (pianist); "they can be the same" (French horn player); "two sides of the same coin" (cellist); "I think when people use words like magical, enchanting or transcendent in this context, they are often talking about a virtuoso performance" (classical guitarist). A student singer wrote: "Virtuosity ... focuses on the brilliance of perfection rather than interpretation and emotion. While one can focus on one or the other, *in order to be a true master of your craft* [emphasis added] you must have both."

No relationship. By contrast, roughly equal proportions of students and professionals (23.5% and 21.9% respectively), expressed opinions similar to those of critics in past centuries, seeing little or no relationship between virtuosity and music making, “magical” or otherwise: “There is not always a relationship between virtuosity and intense musicality” (professional oboist); “You can be virtuosic and still give a very boring performance” (student tuba player). One respondent contrasted virtuosity, music making and showmanship (discussed further in relation to the theme of communication, below):

there's little relationship between the two, although I can appreciate people being amazed by “pyrotechnics” of showy performers, and/or precision of any professional compared to an audience member's own understanding of the instrument – the “how do they do that?!” factor is kind of “magical” I suppose. (professional pianist)

Finally, in an echo of Burk's (1918) diatribe against concertos, the professional composer quoted above wrote: “It is not just about the performer, but also the music.”

The remaining themes were derived from smaller datasets of responses. The order of reporting the third and fourth largest datasets has been reversed to reflect the order in which the relevant questions were posed. *Aspirations towards virtuosity* (67 responses) and *How virtuosity is achieved* (88 responses) were largely but not exclusively drawn from responses to Question 3, “To what extent do you aspire to be, or teach others to be virtuoso performers?” and Question 4, “How do you go about becoming or teaching others to become a virtuoso performer?” respectively. The final theme, *Communication*, emerged from 65 responses across the whole dataset.

Aspirations towards virtuosity. Little can be gleaned from the published literature as to the extent to which aspirant and professional musicians value the quest for virtuosity either for themselves or others.

Prerequisite. In their responses to the question “To what extent do you aspire to be, or teach others to be virtuoso performers?” respondents indicated that virtuosity was seen as a “prerequisite for being a successful soloist” (student cellist). If not a prerequisite it was considered desirable to become virtuosos themselves, or to teach virtuosos, by a slightly higher proportion of students (29.4%) than professionals (21.9%). As another student, a mezzo-soprano, wrote: “That is the only point in training to begin with.” Two professionals agreed: “It is vital, if the performer wishes to be a soloist of any worth” (cornet/trumpet player); “It's the whole point of being a musician, in my opinion. Some students will never manage it, but I always hope they will” (soprano). Another pointed out, however, that “virtuosity is part of a musician's skill set, albeit not the most important” (viola player).

None. Other respondents, 25% of the professionals and 20.6% of the students, reported that they did not aspire to train virtuosos or become virtuoso performers themselves. One professional pianist referred to their “admiration for those performers who want to perform this music, but it's not my cup of tea! ... I don't, personally [aspire to be a virtuoso], but I have to respect my students who want to engage in virtuosic repertoire!” while another wrote “Not much to be honest, even though I have been called a ‘virtuoso’ pianist by many in the past, and that my playing is often referred to as ‘virtuosic’. A little strange!” A third professional pianist and teacher – the respondent quoted earlier who had himself “sacrificed a lost childhood” – wrote:

I don't believe the teleological goal of “becoming a virtuoso” is a useful one in music education. For gifted students, that outcome may occur given the right ingredients (and a focus on ingredients

responsive to the individual student can be very productive in aspects of life and music other than virtuosity too). There are methods for forcing virtuosity, such as have traditionally been used in specialist music schools, but these may incur a high personal cost for the student.

Current students' comments included "I'm not sure how far it's within my capabilities. At the moment it's not even something I've thought about" (mezzo-soprano) and "I don't aspire to be a virtuoso performer. The repertoire I associate with virtuosity doesn't really appeal to me" (pianist).

Such observations raise important questions for educators. One concerns the extent to which it is justifiable to encourage virtuosity for its own sake in young musicians, given the potentially deleterious effects on their physical and psychological health. Another question relates to the range of repertoire choices to which young musicians should be exposed, besides those they encounter independently; we will return to this topic when considering experience of performing, below.

Personal best. Eleven students (16.2%) and just one professional focused on what one student pianist called "striving for personal excellence". Others responded, "I enjoy striving to be the best performer I can be" (student flautist) and "pushing yourself to work to your full potential" (student violinist). One gave an example: "I try to practise things that challenge me, and make me think. ... 'Don't stop. Keep going.' – Frank Zappa" (electric guitarist). The professional, an oboist, wrote: "I aspire to be the best player I can be, regardless of how one may define my playing." These comments confirm the views of the performers who took part in Royce's panel discussion; they had agreed that virtuosity represents "that drive to make oneself the best possible instrument for one's art", and indeed, according to one panellist, the ballerina Violette Verdy, "the direct natural result of a drive for perfection" (quoted by Royce, 2004, p. 20).

Still to be achieved. Only five students (7.35%) acknowledged that virtuosity was not yet within their reach: "A level which I am nowhere near" (electric guitarist); "I consider virtuosity to be the next set of pieces that are currently slightly beyond my scope or reach to have total control over and expression with" (violinist).

How virtuosity is achieved. Most musicians, players of musical instruments and singers, are familiar with the pedagogical literature designed to foster virtuoso skills in their own disciplines, and many respondents referred to these in their comments.

Hard work. The overwhelming majority agreed with the sentiments expressed by a student violinist and a professional oboist respectively: "Virtuosity is learned"; "No person was ever born a virtuoso." A larger proportion of responses from professionals (68.8%) than students (58.8%) contributed to this theme. They noted that the development of virtuosity requires "a mind-numbing quantity of focused practice aimed at developing an infallible level of skill and reliability in performance" (viola player) and "thinking about detail to the utmost degree which means developing aural and physical skills to their limits" (oboeist). One professional pianist, rather disarmingly, commented, "I honestly have no idea. (Sorry.) A lot of skill and dedication, perhaps?". Another professional pianist, however, provided a thoughtful account of teaching others to become virtuoso performers:

Making sure that they understand technically and intellectually what they are trying to achieve, so that they are able to realize the technical demands of the music without stress or injuring themselves.

Breaking the music down, as in learning any piece, creating strategies for the micro-moments so that technically the piece can be managed; thinking about the sense of abandonment that seems to be closely related to virtuosity and how this might connect to a sense that once the piece is mastered, the player can experiment with spontaneity, risk-taking, pushing to the extremes (e.g. often of tempo – very fast, and often of dynamics – both very loud and very soft). Making sure the player has a really good intellectual grasp of the piece – analytic understanding, feeling of the cultural background around the piece, the composer's life and background to the work, etc. All of these elements are important. Then thinking about “freeing up” so that there is a sense that whatever happens in performance is okay, there are no limits.

Students were more likely to cite “years of work” (flautist), and specifically “Practise, practise, practise!” (cellist). In many cases this was qualified: “Lots of good practice!” (tuba player); “Proper, analytical, often slow, concentrated practice” (violinist), sometimes of specific materials: “scales, modes, arpeggios, metronome practice, etc.” (electric guitarist). One student pianist recommended “Technical exercises: Hanon, Cortot, etc.” while another added, “first imagining the sounds/colours in your head and then training your fingers to recreate that on an instrument; playing lots of studies (Chopin, Rachmaninov)”. The need for “discipline and repetition, and above all, perseverance” (mezzo-soprano) was also stressed: “It is a process that takes years” (cellist).

Experience of performing. Eleven students (14.7%) recommended “pushing yourself to try challenging repertoire and gaining lots of experience” (violinist). In comments that would not necessarily have made sense to 19th-century virtuosi or their audiences, one highlighted the role of “listening to, appreciating and being able to play all styles of music ... playing in as many musical situations as possible” (bass guitarist). Only four professionals (12.5%) echoed these sentiments: “Virtuosity also means being able to perform music of a variety of periods, not just of the Classical era” (pianist), recommending “lots of performing with good players” (trumpet player) and “lots of performance experience to develop the element of entertainment” (viola player). We will return to this sub-theme in the Conclusion.

Combination of hard work and natural gifts. Five students (7.35%) and two professionals (6.25%) contributed to this sub-theme. As one wrote,

There's a lot to be said for dedicated and disciplined practice but one has to have a flair and natural ability to be a real virtuoso. Various methods exist, practical and theoretical, and there's no doubt that some aspects might not be able to be taught. (professional clarinetist)

Natural gift. Only two students and two professionals (2.9% and 6.5% respectively) attributed virtuosity to natural gifts (or, in de Brossard's [1703] definition, “excess of native endowment”) alone. A professional oboist described virtuosity as “[The] ability to learn incredibly quickly without a teacher, to memorize easily”. More starkly, a professional trumpet player argued, “You've got it or you haven't”.

As we have seen, there were only two – contradictory – references to memory in the dataset: the student pianist whose comment, quoted above, contributed to the theme of mastery did not see memorized performance as a characteristic of virtuosity. This challenges the contemporary performance convention that solo pianists and singers performing with accompaniment are expected to have memorized the music to be played or sung, while other musicians are not.

Communication

Showmanship. Similar proportions of students and professionals (29.4% and 28.1%, respectively), like earlier critics, described virtuosity in terms of “musical flair and showmanship” (student cellist). A professional pianist defined it as “obvious impressive stuff. Fast, loud, showy playing that makes the general public go ‘ooh!’”. As one student pianist observed, “sheer mechanical ability can indeed overwhelm an audience and give a kind of frenzied rush of excitement”. Others, including a second student pianist, displayed some ambivalence: “[virtuosity] gives an impression of brilliant, but pointless finish”. A professional conductor referred to it as “mere display on the part of performer(s), probably rewarding to the performers’ egos but to no-one else”. As a student mezzo-soprano asked, “where do you draw the line between virtuosity and showing off?”. The history of virtuosity was referred to by a professional cellist who considered the potential relationship between performer and audience:

Of course virtuosity has been used to attract fame and fortune – and even to triumph over enemies! – and this is where that joy crosses over into vanity and even a kind of dependence on impressing an audience, in order to feel the performance was worth anything.

Virtuosity used in this way involves a transaction between performer and audience. The musician may be accused of selling out, of “vulgar display”, but the listener is also implicated, as pointed out by the professional pianist who saw no relationship between virtuosity and music making (above) and as we will also see below.

Audience. Rather than “impressing an audience”, a larger proportion of students (25%) than professionals (18.8%) valued “connecting with the audience” (student cellist), as proposed by Monteiro (2007).

I think virtuosity plays a role in some of the most transcendent or enchanting music making but that there is something else present to do with the connection of the soul of the performer to the music, and through that to those in the audience. (student viola player)

The “soul of the performer” links to the sub-theme of personal expression: unless the musician feels connected to the music, the audience is unlikely to feel connected to the performer.

Transported to another world. A small number of respondents developed this theme further. Citing Kant (1911), Monteiro (2007) refers to virtuoso performance as enabling audiences to “touch the sublime” (p. 318). In this vein, one of the three students (4.41%) whose comments contribute to this theme described

true virtuosity ... when a performer can play an arguably less technically impressive piece (say a movement from Bach’s unaccompanied sonatas) and leave the audience with the feeling that they have been transported somehow, to another world. I guess that in that sense, it has a magical quality to it (student violinist),

while, according to the professionals (9.38%), “the virtuoso performer expresses a connection to something that touches the human spirit – gives a sense of connected purpose to a higher power” (teacher of physical / mental awareness). A flautist wrote, “as a performer you reach for the sublime”; an oboist commented that “the super skilled executor is able to communicate and deliver the listener into the magical and transcendental “other” world of music”.

music making tended to see virtuosity as a form of showmanship, although respondents who defined virtuosity in terms of personal expression regarded it as an effective way of communicating with audiences. Finally, a link is shown between responses reflecting “no aspirations” towards virtuosity, for its own sake, and the experience of performing a variety of repertoires, once again emphasizing the pre-eminence of music making.

Conclusion

The present article fills a gap in the published literature on virtuosity by reporting and discussing the views on the topic from a range of student and professional performing musicians, largely but not exclusively training or trained in Western classical music. These views were extremely varied, but the themes and sub-themes that emerged generally reflected existing models, suggesting that virtuosity can be conceptualized in different ways, with different meanings for listeners who may or may not also be performers and/or composers. “The brilliance of perfection” was a common theme, but the majority of respondents saw it as a tool for the making of music, which on the whole was more highly valued than the “pointless finish” of “mere” virtuosity. There is some evidence, based on respondents’ views on the importance of performing experience, that virtuosity may be undergoing a process of redefinition and reframing. It can be argued that 19th- and early 20th-century musicians and writers such as Schumann, Satie and Burk clearly distinguished between music they described as virtuosic (bad) and non-virtuosic (good). Contemporary musicians are exposed to a much wider variety of musical genres and styles, and expected to demonstrate their versatility as well as their virtuosity. They therefore tend to take a more relativist stance, perhaps, avoiding value judgements.

Several limitations are associated with each of the methods used: qualitative, quantitative and mixed. Qualitative research is by definition exploratory and subjective: these characteristics can, of course, be seen as strengths, rather than weaknesses. The author’s interpretation of the findings was thus influenced by her own views on virtuosity, as discussed in the Introduction. While the quantitative element of the study was designed to provide some context for the views of respondents, a larger sample could have produced more useful findings on differences between groups such as singers and instrumentalists, younger and older performers and teachers, musicians who received training in different countries and specialists in particular genres. Respondents were not asked to reflect on the extent to which their views had been informed by reading about the history, theory or philosophy of virtuosity, or who had learned from influential others such as teachers and role models; future researchers could well seek a greater depth of understanding on these topics by conducting interviews with musicians. It would also be well worth following up some of the questions arising from the data generated in the present study. These might include the effects on health and wellbeing of striving to develop virtuosity; the relationship between versatility and virtuosity; and the role played in the development of virtuosity of exposure to multiple genres of music and music making.

A final insight from a respondent who is a professional cellist can be seen as resonating with Perahia’s experience of Horowitz addressing technique as “a larger subject of life, of sounds, of colours”:

I teach virtuosic music to help people improve their skills, imagination, their mental focus and courage. It’s important to recognize when one is being virtuosic and when one is not, when it is called for, why and in what way. These are all naturally questions I ask myself too.

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Appendix. Number of occurrences of most frequently-occurring words in responses of student and professional musicians.

Question	Student	Professional
1. How would you define virtuosity in music performance?	Technical/technique (30) Perform/performance/ performing (20) Ability (12) Music (12) Musical/musically (7) Control (5)	Technical/technique (21) Ability (13) Musical (11) Level (8) Music (7) Playing (6) Difficult (6)
2. What does virtuosity mean to you?	Technical/technique (34) Performance(16) Ability (15) Musical/musically (14) Music (11)	Technical/technique (13) Music (11) Musical (9) Performance (8)
3. To what extent do you aspire to be, or teach others to be virtuoso performers?	Aspire (29) Able (18) Teach (16) Performer (15) Technical/technique (12)	Teach (12) Technical/technique (9) Students (8) Aspire (7) Musical (4) Important (6) Performance (6)
4. How do you go about becoming or teaching others to become a virtuoso performer?	Practice/practise (43) Music (32) Performance (15) Technical/technique (14)	Technical/technique (15) Music (11) Teach (11) Performance (8) Students (7) Practice/practise (7)
5. How do you view the relationship (if any) between virtuoso performance and what might be thought of – or described as – “magical”, “enchanting” or “transcendent” music making?	Music (66) Performance (40) Magical (30)	Performance (19) Performer (12) Magical (10) Music (8)