DURMS
Durham Undergraduate Research in Music & Science

Imposter Syndrome & Musicality

Aliyah Ramatally
Durham University

ABSTRACT

Previous research on imposter syndrome in the music community is limited. Hence, this study investigates whether imposter syndrome is more prevalent among people with greater musical ability and if self-sabotaging behaviours are common resulting mannerisms. This project involved two separate studies with differing participant samples. The first study (N = 30) consisted of an online questionnaire featuring a self-report measure of musical ability, a self-report measure of imposter syndrome, as well as several open-ended questions. The second study consisted of individual semi-structured interviews with three music educators aimed to gaining insights into the prevalence of imposter syndrome among their students. Overall, the results show that imposter tendencies increase as levels of musicality increase. Qualitative data gained from the interviewees and the online questionnaire showed that self-sabotaging behaviours are prevalent among musicians.

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's society, mental health illnesses are among the most common health conditions with one in four persons worldwide being affected at some stage in their lifetime. With about 450 million people suffering with varying conditions, mental disorders are now one of the leading causes of illness and disability worldwide (WHO, 2001). For musicians, the process of creating, practicing, and performing can take a toll on a person's physical and mental health. A musician's success is often established by their ability to maintain performance standards which leaves room for many moments of failure and rejection. The high levels of creative and emotional input can potentially lead to musicians believing that they are not good enough and may result in their lack of confidence affecting their performance and ability to accept opportunities (Flowers, 2016). This experience is known as Imposter Syndrome (IS), originally termed 'Imposter Phenomenon', which by Bravata (2020) is defined as 'a condition that describes high-achieving individuals who, despite their objective successes, fail to internalise their accomplishments and have persistent self-doubt and fear of being exposed as a fraud or imposter'.

Though the prevalence of IS in society is difficult to measure, it has been suggested that at least 70% of people have encountered symptoms of it during their lives (Warrell, 2014). IS was first acknowledged among 'high achieving' women who were considered highly esteemed persons in their field. Since this initial research, IS has been found to be present in other demographic groups, from secondary school to tertiary-level students and even in helping professionals such as doctors and nurses (Sims, 2013).

Research shows that persons with IS may show clinical symptoms such as anxiety, low self-confidence, feelings of depression, and frustration over the inability to reach self-imposed high standards (Clance & Imes, 1978). Other additional signs can include low self-esteem, helpless reactions, feeling unworthy, shame, guilt about success, emotional exhaustion, perfectionism, and fear of failure (Bernard et al., 2012; Clance & Imes, 1978). Furthermore, according to Cooksey (2012), people suffering from IS may also 'self-sabotage' by belittling themselves or by not seeking necessary help. Based on these effects and symptoms listed, IS potentially affects the mental health of individuals as it can have an overall negative impact on their mental well-being (Sims, 2013).

This self-sabotaging behaviour, also known as "self-handicapping", is a psychological behaviour that people exhibit to protect their image and distort their feelings of success (Flowers, 2016). In addition to Cooksey's study (2012), Flowers (2016) stated that IS plays an important role in self-handicapping behaviours, whether it be by a person's home and work environments, or by traits including overthinking, perfectionism, and diligence. Flowers' study consisted of two surveys based on the Rhodewalt Self-Handicapping Survey (SHS; Jones & Rhodewalt, 1982) - a well-documented measure of self-handicapping behaviours. The first group of 157 students at the University of North Texas successfully showed that most students faced the problem of self-handicapping. As this research was limited to only students at the University of North Texas, she then replicated her survey to measure self-handicapping among musicians in general. Her predicted results were that IS and depression scores respond to self-handicapping behaviours. The revised survey consisted of an expanded demographic profiling along with the Rhodewalt Self-Handicapping Survey (SHS; Jones & Rhodewalt, 1982), Zung Self-Depression Scale (SDS; Zung, 1965), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965), and the Clance Imposter Phenomenon Survey (CIPS; Clance, 1985). Overall, the results showed that a large percentage of musicians exhibited self-handicapping behaviours with IS and depression, which has a strong significance in the majority of the areas. Though Flowers' study was more focused on the idea of self-handicapping, her study clearly showed that self-handicapping and IS work together to cause musicians to berate their successes and deny opportunities.

Apart from this correlation, IS can also be connected to environmental afflictions and other mental clinical symptoms including depression and anxiety (Flowers, 2016; Sims, 2013).

Sims' study uses the CIPS (Clance, 1985) on focus groups of the American Music Therapy Association (AMTA). The CIPS consists of 20 statements which measure feelings such as fear

of failure despite previous success and attribution to luck. The scoring system is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Cut-off Scores in the CIPS

Score	Level of Imposter Tendencies
40 or less	Few Imposter Tendencies
41-60	Moderate Imposter Tendencies
61-80	Frequent Imposter Tendencies
80 or more	Intense Imposter Tendencies

Sims' (2013) results through the CIPS scale showed that the average score of participants fell in the range of frequent imposter tendencies with a score of 69.8. Although Sims' study was limited to the AMTA music therapy students, her study showed that imposter tendencies were prevalent among students in a music-related field. The following question then remains to be addressed: Does having musical attributes affect the intensity of a person's imposter tendencies?

Defining someone's level of musicality can be challenging due to the various outlooks on what it means to be 'musical'. According to Levitin (2012), "musical ability is popularly regarded to be innate: one either is or is not born with musical talent". Moreover, he states that musical ability goes beyond performance and composition, as there is a need for "an inclusive approach to capture as many musical behaviours as possible" in order to understand what it means to be musical. His suggestions are supported by Hallam and Prince (2003) who claim that "musical ability (includes) a wide range of perceptive activities such as listening, appreciating, and responding to music," and so any assessment of musicality must account for this since there can be instances where unexpected persons can exhibit high levels of musical competence. In this study, levels of musicality are measured using the Goldsmiths Musical Sophistication Index (Gold-MSI; Müllensiefen et al., 2014) since it is a comprehensive and nuanced questionnaire, which evaluates the participants' musical abilities.

There are two main aims of this study. The first aim is to explore IS as a prevailing problem that creates self-sabotaging behaviours among musicians. My hypothesis is that the intensity of imposter tendencies will increase as the level of musicality increases. This question is addressed in an online questionnaire. The second aim is to gain further exploratory insights into the prevalence of IS among music students and this is addressed via semi-structured interview sessions with music educators.

2. METHOD: QUESTIONNAIRE STUDY

Design. This study consisted of an online questionnaire created with JISC Online Survey, featuring four sections: demographics, a measure of musical ability (Gold-MSI; Müllensiefen et al., 2014), a measure of IS (CIPS; Clance, 1985), and open-ended questions. Overall, the survey consisted of 40 questions.

Participants. Both non-musicians and musician students at Durham University participated, collecting a total of 30 participants, ranging from the ages of 19 to 25 (M=21.8, SD=1.4). The participants were recruited through university group chats and student mailing lists.

Procedure. Before participants began the experiment, they were asked to carefully read through the information sheet which provided information about the study. They were then asked to give their consent for taking part in the experiment. The questionnaire then proceeded to ask general questions on the participant's age and whether they believed they had musical attributes or not. Following this, the participants then answered a series of questions from the Gold-MSI to test their musical abilities. The participants then moved on to the next section which was based on the CIPS and measured their levels of imposter tendencies. Finally, the participants were asked a series of open-ended questions to which they were allowed to express their views more openly on the topic.

3. METHOD: INTERVIEW STUDY

Design. Interviews were conducted via Zoom with three music educators with the aim of engaging in conversation about their awareness of IS, its symptoms, and effects, as well as its ability to cause self-sabotaging behaviours among their own students. These interviews were conducted to supplement the questionnaires distributed. All participants provided informed consent.

Participants. Three participants were recruited for this study: interviewee no.1 was from an American University, interviewee no. 2 from a Trinidadian University, and interviewee no. 3 from a British University. All interviewees' ages ranged from early 40s to late 50s and all have had experience teaching tertiary-level music students.

4. RESULTS: QUESTIONNAIRE STUDY

The results for the surveys administered were analysed on Excel.

GOLD-MSI. Figure 1 shows the data collected indicated that a large percentage of participants scored an average/high level of musicality (M = 3.79, SD = 1.03). Participants were then divided into 3 groups according to their levels of musicality as indicated by the Gold-MSI scores (see Table 2).

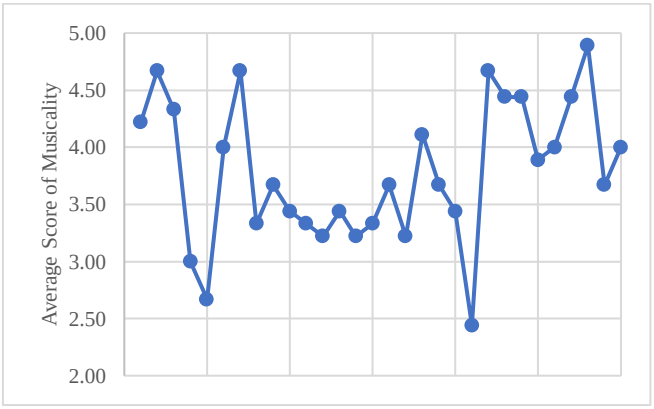

Figure 1. Gold-MSI scores showing average musicality scores per participant

Table 2. Levels of Musicality

Label	Average Total Score	Level of Musicality	No. of Respondents
A	2-3	Low	2
B	3-4	Moderate	15
C	4-5	High	13

CIPS. Individual scores from the CIPS are presented in Figure 2 with the average overall score to fall in the range of frequent imposter tendencies (M = 74.1, SD = 11.7; see also Table 1).

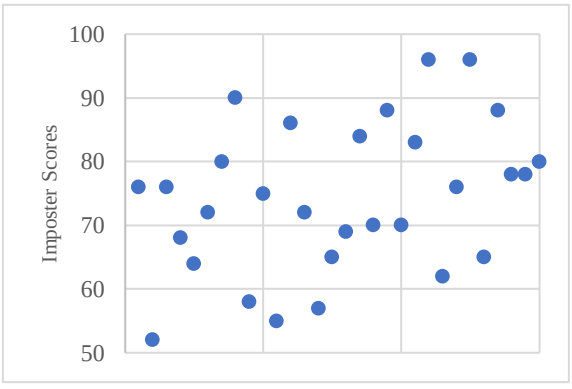

Figure 2. Imposter tendency scores of each participant

The imposter tendency scores of each participant were then correlated with the corresponding levels of musicality. As shown in Figure 3, the scatter plot graph illustrates the moderate positive correlation (r = 0.39) between the IS scores and the musicality levels of participants. In line with this correlation analysis, Figure 4 shows the means of the IS scores per each group of participants showing different musicality levels. Overall, these results show that imposter tendencies tend to increase as levels of musicality increase.

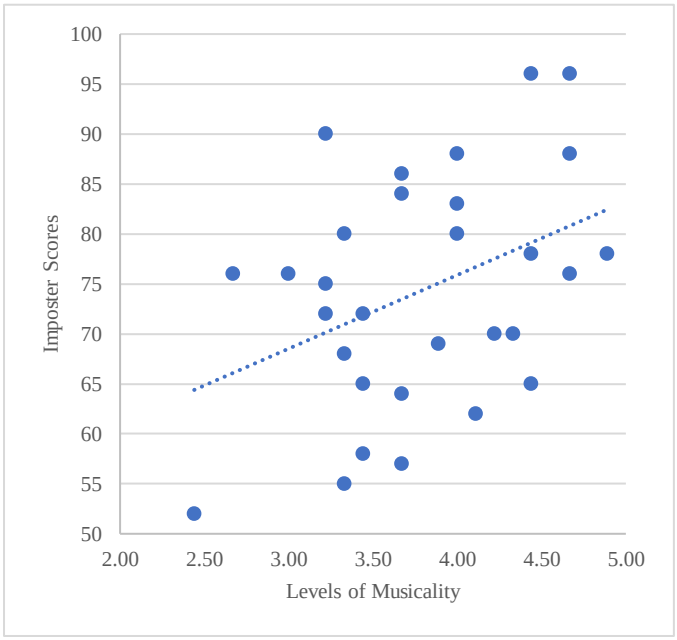

Figure 3. Correlation between imposter scores and musicality

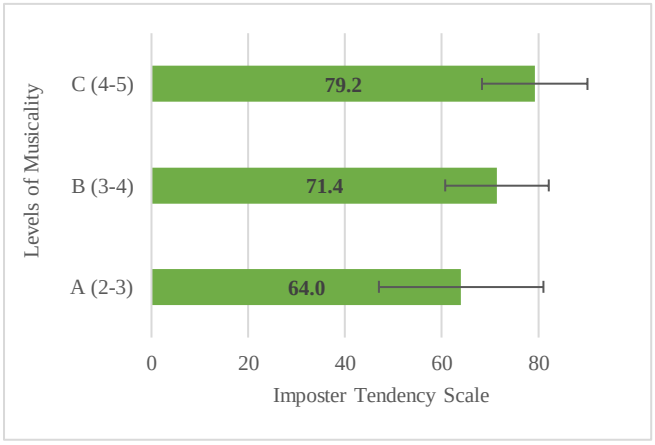

Figure 4. Average imposter tendency scores per musicality groups

Open-ended questions. Overall, 76.6% of participants were aware of IS before taking this questionnaire, while 73.3% of them believed that they had experienced it before. 66.6% believe that IS was higher in musicians with the majority of participants reasoning that this was because music is a 'competitive subject' with musicians always 'being perceived and judged'. 63.3% of participants revealed that at some point of their life, they had passed up on opportunities due to feelings of self-doubt or not being good enough. 80% of participants believed that self-sabotaging of opportunities and success could have been a result of a person believing that they are a fraud, with many stating that low self-confidence can cause a person to be afraid of failure.

5. RESULTS: INTERVIEW STUDY

The interviews conducted provided additional insights into the views of music educators on IS awareness. All interviewees had over a decade of experience being involved in the music education system, however only interviewee no. 3 knew about IS beforehand. After stating a definition of IS, some common symptoms were listed to all three interviewees, and they were then asked if they could identify any among their students. After given a moment to think on it, all interviewees responded in the affirmative, with all similarly replying that they also noticed these traits among themselves. On their own accord, they all led the conversation to talking about their own experiences with IS.

"I see these symptoms regularly in students… I must say that I would be worried if I didn't recognise some of them in my own students. We, as musicians are taught to be self-critical and aware, but sometimes we can be our own harshest critic" (Interviewee no.1)

The first interviewee made an excellent point that some form of questioning is healthy for musicians and that this is something seen in all generations. However, he believes that the Millennial Age have coined a term for serious cases of self-doubt.

The conversation was then directed towards a scenario:

"If one of your students is noticeably struggling with any of these symptoms, how would you help them cope with it?"

Interviewee no. 2 was confident in answering, as he stated that he always tried to create a welcoming and safe environment for his students, while interviewee no. 3 felt that the best way for us as a community to combat these mental challenges was to have conversations about them.

Finally, we discussed self-sabotaging behaviours and its relationship with IS. Both interviewees no. 1 and 2 similarly stated that arts in general is an emotionally and physically demanding field and through competition, performance and constant practicing, a lot of their own students are 'let down' if they cannot get something done right. All three interviewees agreed that mental challenges, such as anxiety, depression and IS are particularly prevalent among musicians and that the best way to start helping others is through education and communication.

6. GENERAL DISCUSSION

The results of the survey supported the main hypothesis presented, while agreeing with the previous literature. The overall average imposter scores of Durham University students were of frequent imposter tendencies, which aligns similarly with Sims (2013), who focused her study on participants of tertiary-level education. However, this study is set apart from previous research by including an assembly of both non-musician and musician students. By using the Gold-MSI (Müllensiefen et al., 2014) to calculate each participant's levels of musical sophistication regardless of whether they considered themselves to be musicians or not, this study was able to add to previous research by providing proof that musicality as a global concept has an important role to play in the levels of IS tendencies. The study was able to demonstrate a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.39$) between the IS scores and levels of musicality of participants, providing evidence that as levels of musicality increase, the intensity of imposter tendency scores also increases.

There are still some limitations presented in the survey distributed for this study since it was limited to a small sample group of participants (N=30) who were only students at Durham University. As a result of the small number of participants, it was found that persons with the lowest level of musicality (Group A) were only two respondents compared to the moderate and high levels of musicality (Group B and C). Additionally, some other demographics should have been considered, for example including sex and gender profiling, as well as considering background questions on their family union and if appropriate, whether they considered themselves to have been brought up in upper, middle, or lower-class homes. Nevertheless, the hypothesis which stated that IS tendencies are more intense among persons with high levels of musicality was successfully supported in this study.

Similar to Flowers (2016), the present study through open-ended questions in the online survey, showed that 80% of participants believed that self-sabotaging of opportunities and success could be a result of a person believing that they are incompetent and are a fraud. Additionally, in the survey 63.3% of participants claimed that they faced many missed opportunities due to self-doubt, which mirrors the research findings of Flowers (2016). As her study was primarily centred on self-handicapping, her results were more in-depth and objective as she used the Rhodewalt Self-Handicapping Survey (Jones & Rhodewalt, 1982) in comparison to this study, which mainly allowed participants to express their thoughts and opinions on self-handicapping's relationships with IS through open-ended questions.

Through discussions in the interviews with music educators, both interviewee no.1 and 2 similarly stated that fields such as music and the arts are particularly emotionally and physically demanding:

"When someone is highly critical and full of self-doubt, they really begin to undermine their abilities. I know some students who dropped opportunities due to fear of failure, and some who after a performance harshly put down themselves for the littlest and unnoticeable mistakes" (Interviewee No. 2)

"As a teacher you want to create a delicate balance. You want your students to be self-critical, but not to a point where it damages them." (Interviewee No. 1)

In conversing with these music educators, this study enabled the establishment of the connection of self-handicapping to IS symptoms, which clearly supports Flowers' previous research. Hence, the initial aim of this study which investigates IS as a prevailing problem that creates self-sabotaging behaviours among musicians, has been strongly reinforced not only by previous research, but by the open-ended questions in the survey as well by music educators.

Another important part of this research was to gain insight on techniques and strategies that can be implemented to help students who are facing mental challenges such as anxiety, depression, and IS. Interviewee no. 3 felt that the best way for us as a community to tackle mental challenges is to have conversations about them:

"It is too common that musicians, students and people in general are afraid to talk about these topics. I think if we start openly talking about these issues people who are struggling will be more aware of how to cope with it and know they are not alone!"

Additionally, interviewee No. 2 believed that creating a safe and welcoming environment for his students reaped many benefits:

"Oftentimes when a student makes a mistake when performing, I praise them. It is important for my students to understand that it is okay to make mistakes. This is my attempt of eliminating perfectionism."

It is important to recognise that the results from the interview study with music educators remain preliminary given that the sample group was small and did not allow for stable conclusions to be drawn. Furthermore, in the open-ended questions, most respondents stated that the best way to combat IS was to simply 'learn to love yourself' and to 'stop overthinking' since 'everyone is flawed and with that knowledge people should recognise that it is okay to fail or not to do your best.' One participant who believed that IS affected their life stated that 'I recognise that I am not alone, so I try to work proactively to improve myself.'

There are many directions in which this study can undergo in the future. Interviewee no. 1 made an excellent point that IS might also be more prevalent in minorities and so there should be more focus on eliminating inequities. Certain key factors such as a gender, sex, race, ethnicity, as well as different family and financial backgrounds, will be important variables to research in the future. This research project is a good step forward into the exploration of IS and how it is a prominently occurring phenomenon within the music community. Mental health illnesses and challenges need to be prioritised among musicians as the level of emotion and creativity required for optimum performance in the field can be exhausting. Measures need to be put in place to ensure that conversations about mental health are stimulated in the community, as well as to prioritise it within the music education system more effectively.

REFERENCES

Bernard, N.S., Dollinger, S.J., & Ramaniah, N.V. (2002). Applying the big five personality factors to the impostor phenomenon. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 78*(2), 321-333.

Bravata, D.M., Madhusudhan, D.K., Boroff, M., Cokley, K.O. (2020). Commentary: Prevalence, Predictors, and Treatment of Imposter Syndrome: A Systematic Review. *J Ment Health Clin Psychol, 4*(3): 12-16.

Clance, P.R., & Imes, S.A. (1978). The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice, 15*(3), 241-247.

Clance, P. R. (1985). *The impostor phenomenon: Overcoming the fear that haunts your success*. Atlanta, GA: Peachtree Publishers.

Cooksey, K. (2012). Imposter: Understanding, Discussing, and Overcoming Imposter Syndrome. *University of Hawaii at Hilo. American Astronomical Society: Spectrum,* 1,14-15.

Flowers, M.C. (2016). *Confronting the Enemy Within: An In-Depth Study on Psychological Self-Handicapping Among Collegiate Musicians.* University of North Texas.

Hallam, S., & Prince, V. (2003). Conceptions of musical ability. *Research Studies in Music Education, 20*, 2-22.

Hallam, S. (2010). 21st Century conceptions of musical ability. *Psychology of Music, 38*, 308-330.

Kananifar, N., Seghatoleslam, T., Atashpour, S.H., et al. (2015). The Relationship between Imposter Phenomenon and Mental Health in Isfahan University Students. *International Medical Journal, 22*(3), 144-146.

Levitin, D.J. (2012). What does it mean to be musical? *Neuron, 73*, 633-637.

Müllensiefen, D., Gingras, B., Musil, L.., Stewart,L. (2014). The Musicality of Non-Musicians: An Index for Assessing Musical Sophistication in the General Population. PLOS ONE 9(2): e89642.

Sims, J.D. (2013). *The Phenomenological Examination of Imposter Phenomenon in Music Therapy Students*. B.M.E: University of Oklahoma.

World Health Organisation, World Health Report 2001: Mental Disorder affect one in four people, https://www.who.int/news/item/28-09-2001-the-world-health-report-2001-mental-disorders-affect-one-in-four-people.

Warrell, M. (2014). Afraid of being 'found out?" How to overcome impostor syndrome. *Forbes Magazine*. Retrieved from http://www.forbes.com/sites/margiewarrell/2014/04/03/impostor-syndrome/#1edbe2e7eb9d.

APPENDIX A- QUESTIONNAIRE

GENERAL INFORMATION

How old are you?

_____

What title best describes you

- Non-Musician
- Music loving non-musician
- Amateur musician
- Serious Amateur musician

- Semi-professional musician
- Professional musician

Do you play an instrument? If so what instrument?

_____

SECTION ONE: MUSICAL ABILITY (GOLD-MSI)

I spend a lot of my free time doing music-related activities.
1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neutral
4. Agree
5. Strongly Agree

Music is kind of an addiction for me- I couldn't live without it.
1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neutral
4. Agree
5. Strongly Agree

I listen attentively to music for ___ per day.
1. 0-15 mins
2. 15-30 mins
3. 30-60 mins
4. 1-2 hrs
5. 2hrs or more

I keep track of new music that I come across (e.g., new artists or recordings).
1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neutral
4. Agree
5. Strongly Agree

I often pick certain music to motivate or excite me.
1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neutral
4. Agree
5. Strongly Agree

I can play ____ musical instruments
1. 0
2. 1
3. 2
4. 3
5. 4 or more

I have had formal training in musical theory for _____ years.
1. 0
2. 1
3. 2
4. 3
5. 4 or more

I usually know where I'm hearing a song for the first time.
1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neutral
4. Agree
5. Strongly Agree

When I hear a piece of music, I can usually identify its genre.
1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neutral
4. Agree
5. Strongly Agree

SECTION TWO: IDENTIFYING IMPOSTER SYNDROME BEHAVIOUR (CIPS)

(5-point Likert Scale: 1- Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Neutral, 4- Agree, 5- Strongly Agree)

1. I have often succeeded on a test or task even though I was afraid that I would not do well before I undertook the task.

2. I can give the impression that I'm more competent than I really am.

3. I avoid evaluations if possible and have a dread of others evaluating me.

4. When people praise me for something I've accomplished, I'm afraid I won't be able to live up to their expectations of me in the future.

5. I sometimes think I obtained my present position or gained my present success because I happened to be in the right place at the right time or knew the right people.

6. I'm afraid people important to me may find out that I'm not as capable as they think I am.

7. I tend to remember the incidents in which I have not done my best more than those times I have done my best.

8. I rarely do a project or task as well as I'd like to do it.

9. Sometimes I feel or believe that my success in my life or in my job has been the result of some kind of error.

10. It's hard for me to accept compliments or praise about my intelligence or accomplishments.

11. At times, I feel my success has been due to some kind of luck.

12. I'm disappointed at times in my present accomplishments and think I should have accomplished much more.

13. Sometimes I'm afraid others will discover how much knowledge or ability I really lack.

14. I'm often afraid that I may fail at a new assignment or undertaking even though I generally do well at what I attempt.

15. When I've succeeded at something and received recognition for my accomplishments, I have doubts that I can keep repeating that success.

16. If I receive a great deal of praise and recognition for something I've accomplished, I tend to discount the importance of what I've done.

17. I often compare my ability to those around me and think they may be more intelligent than I.

18. I often worry about not succeeding with a project or examination, even though others around me have considerable confidence that I will do well.

19. If I'm going to receive a promotion or gain recognition of some kind, I hesitate to tell others until it is an accomplished fact.

20. I feel bad and discouraged if I'm not "the best" or at least "very special" in situations that involve achievement.

SECTION THREE: OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Have you ever heard of Imposter Syndrome before doing this survey?

Do you think that you have had experience/s with Imposter Syndrome?

Do you believe Imposter Syndrome is higher among musicians? If so, please state why.

Do you believe you have given up opportunities due to feelings of self-doubt or lack of self-confidence?

Do you believe Imposter Syndrome can cause a person to self-sabotage new opportunities and success? If so, please state why.

Do you think Imposter Syndrome is linked to other mental challenges (e.g., anxiety, stress, depression…)?

What do you think is the best way to combat Imposter Syndrome?

APPENDIX B- INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW GUIDED QUESTIONS

Can I first ask you to give a short introduction of yourself and your association with music?

How long have you been involved in music education?

Just for clarity I'm going to read a definition of Imposter Syndrome:

Imposter Syndrome refers to the idea that you are only successful due to luck and not to your talents and qualifications. A person suffering from Imposter Syndrome sometimes believes that they are a fraud and are not as competent as others believe them to be.

Have you heard of the term Imposter Syndrome before?

I know it might be difficult to identify Imposter Syndrome exactly with a student.

I'm just going to list some common symptoms of Imposter Syndrome and I'd like you to tell me if you have noticed any of them among your students.

- Extreme lack of self confidence
- Feelings of inadequacy
- Constant comparison to other people
- Berating one's performance
- Anxiety
- Self-doubt
- Distrust in one's own intuition and capabilities
- Negative self-talk
- Sabotaging one's own success
- Attributing one's success to external factors

In the instance that you recognise that one of your students is struggling with any of the symptoms listed, do you have any strategies to help them cope with it

Do you think these symptoms can lead to self-sabotaging behaviours in their music practice and competitiveness?

Do you think that mental challenges such as high levels of anxiety, depression and imposter syndrome is particularly prevalent among musicians?

Can you think of anyway, we as a community, can help students combat mental challenges better?