

Listening Between the Notes: Mental Health Awareness for Studio Music Teachers

I have spent most of my life in music—as a performer, teacher, and arts leader—accepting uncertainty, pressure, and emotional strain as part of the job. Like many musicians, I followed this path not because it was sensible or secure, but because I could not imagine doing anything else.

My early encounters with music were intoxicating: a Melbourne Symphony Orchestra visit to my regional school gym, the chance arrival of a violinist in our dairy-farming hills, and the glamour of the television series *Fame*. I fell in love with the romance of the profession with little understanding of its demands. Training is intense and public; work is often insecure; success is romanticised; and failure feels deeply personal. As I moved through tertiary study and into professional life, experiences of anxiety, exhaustion, and self-doubt—mine and others’—were quietly normalised, framed as individual weakness rather than shared or systemic realities.

Mental health became profoundly personal for me after the death of my son, Emanuel, in 2022. A singer, violinist, and bassoonist at the Melbourne Conservatorium, Emanuel lived with a mental illness that was largely invisible to those around him. Contemporary biopsychosocial models remind us that complex mental illness arises from interactions between biological, psychological, and social factors. In Emanuel’s case, I have come to understand that these factors combined in ways that could not be mitigated by care, love, or opportunity alone.

This understanding has compelled me, as both a mother and a teacher, to reflect on student wellbeing, the culture of musical training, and our responsibilities as educators. This article asks a simple but urgent question: how can we support students’ mental wellbeing without compromising musical excellence?

Musicians and music students report higher levels of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress than the general population, alongside a significantly elevated risk of suicide (1). Romanticised myths of the “tortured artist” obscure the occupational stressors of musicianship and discourage serious engagement with these risks. These stressors—including precarious employment, irregular hours, financial instability, injury, touring pressures, insomnia, isolation, and limited industry support—are well documented (2).

Crucially though, research suggests that many mental health challenges predate professional life, emerging in childhood or adolescence and persisting into advanced levels of musical training and practice (3). If distress is already forming during training, then the environments in which young musicians learn—and the relationships they form within them—matter.

Unlike classroom teachers or team-sport coaches, instrumental teachers often work in long-term, one-to-one relationships that are emotionally open and deeply personal (4). This places us in a unique position to notice struggles and shape not only musical development, but also students' relationship to their work, themselves, and their sense of worth. Despite limited lesson time and minimal formal mental health training, the position of trust we occupy makes it difficult—and arguably unethical—to ignore student wellbeing. The question, then, is not whether wellbeing belongs in the studio, but how we recognise and engage with it responsibly.

For many teachers, mental health remains abstract and we may lack a clear sense of what distress looks like in the studio. This issue was brought into sharp focus for me during a collaborative project with the Flinders Quartet and the Australian Youth Orchestra, performing Lee Bradshaw's *Four Rooms*—an octet dedicated to Emanuel, himself a former AYO musician (5). Supported by Headspace counsellors, the project opened conversations not only about the music, but about practice, pressure, and wellbeing. Across these discussions, a wide range of challenging experiences emerged. Research later helped me understand that this variation is not unusual, and that students often express distress in very different ways. It can appear physiologically (e.g., shallow breathing, sweating), psychologically (e.g., negative self-talk, catastrophising, low motivation), or behaviourally (e.g., ineffective practice, rigid preparation routines). These patterns are not diagnoses but signals—often quiet and persistent—that something is not working for the student.

One well-established mechanism underlying much of this anxiety is maladaptive perfectionism. Striving for high standards—sometimes described as adaptive or “normal” perfectionism—is associated with positive outcomes such as intrinsic motivation, greater effort, and higher achievement, all of which support musical excellence (6).

Maladaptive perfectionism, however, is characterised by unrealistic standards, fixed mindsets, excessive focus on mistakes, and harsh self-criticism. It often emerges early and can persist into professional life (3). It is linked to extrinsic motivation, heightened distress,

and debilitating anxiety, and is a recognised risk factor for poor mental health. In the studio, this may present as inefficient or compulsive practice, relentless repetition in pursuit of an unattainable ideal, or avoidance driven by fear of failure. Musicians score higher than average on maladaptive perfectionism and performance anxiety (3).

This raises an important question about our place, as teachers, within these patterns.

As instrumental teachers, we work within a rich tradition of string pedagogy, built on decades of accumulated knowledge and experience. This is not a deficit model: we know what we are teaching, and our pedagogical traditions are both rigorous and effective. However, within a performance-driven culture that prioritises auditions, examinations, and error correction, even highly skilled teaching—when it occurs without explicit attention to student wellbeing—can unintentionally reinforce anxiety and maladaptive perfectionist tendencies. Recognising this tension allows us to honour the strengths of established pedagogy while reflecting on how studio culture shapes students’ experiences of pressure.

Two aspects of our lessons are particularly influential: the quality of the teacher–student relationship, and the expectations we set through our feedback.

During the AYO project, members of the Flinders Quartet reflected on the teachers who had most influenced their musical development. While technical and pedagogical mastery mattered, the most impactful teachers were those who also supported personal growth—fostering respectful, trusting environments and encouraging agency and motivation. This aligns with Headspace clinician Jeremy Woolcroft’s observation that much of psychotherapy’s benefit arises from the quality of the human relationship itself (7). Structured approaches remain essential, but relational work is central to effective teaching.

As FQ violinist Wilma Smith observed, “It basically boils down to having authentic relationships, being a decent human and exercising empathy and care.” We can all do this. While we are employed as music teachers, not therapists, investing in these relationships strengthens both student wellbeing and musical learning. Myths of the “suffering genius” do not serve our students.

Research supports this relational emphasis (8). Teachers who offer supportive, adaptable instruction within empathic environments, using repertoire appropriate to students’ musical

and emotional development, are more likely to foster positive learning (3). Conversely, a lack of such support and an approach defined solely by outcomes may contribute to distress and heightened performance anxiety (3).

Examinations and performances can be but one measure of success among many. Pre- and post-performance preparation and reflection can help frame these experiences constructively. Preparing students for auditions does not require early exposure to fear; it can be achieved through positive cognition, confidence, and focus.

Alongside relational work, research points to practical, low-burden ways to strengthen wellbeing without overhauling practice. One such approach is the PIMS Model (9), which integrates Positive Psychology into studio pedagogy. Designed to sit alongside existing methods (e.g. Suzuki, school and university programs), it offers a philosophical framework rather than a prescriptive technique. Its strength lies in its flexibility: teachers can draw on its principles selectively and adapt them to their own context, repertoire, and students while maintaining high standards.

The PIMS Model encourages teachers to:

- begin lessons with a positive focus,
- help students identify and apply personal strengths,
- pause to acknowledge moments of success, and
- provide feedback that values effort, strategies, and learning processes, not outcomes alone.

Beginning with mastery primes confidence and engagement. Asking “What went well this week?” (10) allows students to enter the lesson from a position of competence. Over time, students can use this approach in post-performance reflection to counter negative self-talk by identifying strengths and effective strategies used rather than minor errors. Praising process skills—such as problem-solving, concentration, and technique—rather than fixed traits like ‘natural talent’ supports growth mindset, motivation, and healthy self-efficacy (9).

We cannot prevent all mental illness, nor should we imagine that teaching alone can shield students from every challenge they will face. But as instrumental teachers, we are not without influence. The ways we frame success, respond to difficulty, and build relationships shape

how students experience their work and themselves. Musical excellence does not require distress; in fact, fear and shame often undermine it. By recognising early signs of struggle and teaching in ways that value process as well as outcomes, we can support both high-level musical development and student wellbeing—preparing young musicians not only to perform, but to sustain a healthy, lasting relationship with music.

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