

Back Page: The Talent Bias

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Years of performing as a pianist sparked psychologist Chia-Jung Tsay's curiosity about perceptions of "natural talent" and other factors that can influence how we judge others.

In general, your research explores our decisions and biases about talent. What got you interested in this line of research?

I spent many years performing as a classical pianist. Whether the performances were for concerts, competitions, or auditions, the audience was key. I became fascinated by the role of the evaluator – and, more generally, the factors that contribute to professional selection and evaluation processes.

I am fortunate that in the academic environments I have experienced, a range of backgrounds and training were welcome. Although several streams of my research were initially motivated by my experience as a musician, many of my observations have implications for other domains as well. As an academic in a school of management, these discussions about performance, judgment, expertise, and communication remain quite relevant, and I'm glad to be able to offer a different perspective.

What are some hidden factors that you've found to influence our evaluations of people and information?

One stream of research was motivated by seeing that professional musicians often try to downplay their long hours of practice to enhance the idea that they have natural talent. At many conservatories, you'll find musicians blocking the windows of practice rooms with clothing, newspapers, even furniture so that people can't peek in to see who is striving so hard to master a difficult piece. It seemed that musicians intuit that appearing to be effortless prodigies can enhance their reputation and achievement. I decided to test this empirically as a social scientist.

I found that how we attain our achievements does indeed impact how we're evaluated. For example, when people are presented with candidates who have equal achievements, they often judge the "naturally gifted" candidate as superior to the hard-working "striver." This is true even when the candidates' biographical information and sample performance output are identical. Yet people prefer the "natural." We are more willing to hire that person and more willing to invest in and listen to his or her ideas.

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chia-jung tsay

This is at odds with what we say we believe—that we place great importance on hard work and effort. We generally admire the archetype of the self-made individual and see their effort as a way to support a meritocratic society.

What do you consider your most counterintuitive findings about the way we perceive talent and ability?

Through my own experiences in music competitions, I realized that the type of evaluation process involved — whether competitions required us to submit sound or video recordings — can lead to very different results for the same candidates. I was curious to examine why.

Most people assume that sound is central to the judgment of music performance. I had research participants either listen to or view silent videos of excerpts of live classical competitions. Interestingly, only those who watched silent videos were able to identify the actual winners. This was true for both classical music novices and experts. It seems the original competition judges were overweighting visual information when evaluating performances. Believe it or not, the best way to identify the winners of music competitions may be to turn the sound off.

As an academic, I was delighted to find these counterintuitive results about the power of visuals. As a classical musician, I was somewhat disturbed. These findings hold implications for any type of professional judgment — any decision or domain in which visuals are present but other information may be assumed to be more informative.

How else has your career as a classical pianist influenced your scientific work?

Besides motivating my research interest in decisions about talent, my passion for music has focused my attention on exploring phenomena that I find interesting or odd, initially in music performance. I tie in dependent variables that are meaningful to the domain, such as competition outcomes and other judging

decisions. As a social scientist, I empirically test possible relationships and explanations, looping practitioners into the conversation, and then extending my explorations into other settings to test their generalizability.

Chia-Jung Tsay performs an excerpt of Liszt's Totentanz.

In terms of how I relate to audiences and the creation process, I found it helpful to translate between what I was familiar with in music and what I found in academia. For example, it would be fairly ordinary to schedule multiple full run-throughs and dress rehearsals the month before a concert; I have approached talks in a similar way, and I assumed many other academics also scheduled multiple rehearsals of their talks. I later found out this was far from the norm. That said, I still see many similarities across the two areas. I believe classical musicians have made delayed gratification a habit, and we also tend to expect and even embrace the — often critical — feedback process of any performance.

Do you suspect others view your musical abilities as innate, or the result of hard work?

Such a relevant question, and on so many levels! I would love to imagine that audiences view my musical performances as emerging effortlessly — as if I were simply born with those abilities. And I believe that my most successful performances may have been perceived as such. However, if people reflect upon what it takes to develop skill in most domains, they would probably realize that it took quite a bit of effort (and luck) for any skill or performance to come across as effortless.

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