

REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE

## Getting to the Heart of Why Students Struggle: Motivation in Conservatory Music Students

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## ABSTRACT

In music conservatories, it is common that students may be proficient instrumentalists but fare poorly in aural skills, theory, and music history. Hence, three faculty members at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music (YST) designed a nine-week programme to provide extra help to such students.

We selected students who attained low grades and high absentee levels in a first-year music theory support class, and conducted a nine-week project for them. This project was also open and optional for all other students. During this period, students learnt more about their personality and learning styles through tests, and each participant designed a personal project to tackle their own weaknesses. The process was mentored by faculty through individual advising sessions.

It was found that these students faced issues that affected their motivation to excel in various areas of their studies. This Reflection describes and offers possible solutions for the motivational issues these YST students were facing. Based on the effectiveness of the instructors' interventions to address deeper motivational issues faced by students, and drawing on evidence from research, there are three areas that might inspire changes in teaching modes at YST: 1) in terms of the **approach towards students**, referring to how individual teachers interact with students; 2) via **strategies in advising**, referring to how existing structures of YST's advisory scheme may be reconsidered and how individual advisors may alter their mentoring modes; and 3) via **tweaks in the curriculum**, referring to subtle changes in delivering classroom content to cater to the needs of struggling students. Implementing this project in other Asian conservatories, and comparing the findings with this study or existing studies done in the UK and Australia, could reveal key cultural differences in motivational issues faced by conservatory students within and outside Asia.

**Keywords:** Motivation, music conservatory, mentorship

## INTRODUCTION

This Reflection explores motivation in students at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music (YST). We observed that some YST students may be proficient instrumentalists but fared poorly in aural skills, theory, and music history, and were falling short of graduating as all-rounded musicians. They were considered proficient instrumentalists, having passed a stringent audition that gauged technique and musicality to gain entry into YST. However, academically they fared poorly; not only was their grasp of subject content weak, they did not submit assignments on time and were frequently absent for classes. It is often assumed that such a student lacks aptitude or ambition. As these students progress through the semesters with the same pattern, the assumption becomes a vicious cycle, eventually becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

However, could it be that their poor academic performance is not because they lack aptitude or ambition but due to other factors that inhibit their inherent ability from being developed? Could it be that a student's lack of engagement is not an intrinsic quality, but because they are not inspired? These questions point towards the possibility that motivational issues could be the root cause of under-performing students.

## LITERATURE REVIEW ON MOTIVATION IN UNDERGRADUATE MUSIC CONSERVATORIES

Motivation is a process that incentivises goal-directed behaviour and sustained action. Motivated students tend to pay more attention during lessons or classroom discussions, take the time to research and employ effective learning strategies, and seek help from others when needed (Schunk et al., 2014).

Motivation is often differentiated into the intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation occurs when a person responds to an internal need, such as curiosity or desire (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Extrinsic motivation comes from the environment, not the individual; it is usually in response to a prize or reward, or to avoid an undesirable consequence (Harpine, 2010). Guiding students towards intrinsic motivation is often emphasised by educators and psychologists.

The MUSIC Model of Academic Motivation (Jones, 2009) ironically has nothing to do with music directly, but can be useful in cultivating intrinsic motivation in students. "MUSIC" is an acronym for five components that instructors can consider when designing a course: (1) empowerment, (2) usefulness, (3) success, (4) interest, and (5) caring (see Appendix A for a full description of these components).

In studies done in conservatories in Australia and the United Kingdom on why undergraduate students struggle or lose motivation, researchers noted that with regards to learning music, classically trained musicians are used to the one-to-one model prior to college. Hence, they tend to rely on teacher feedback and are less exposed to diverse skills that contribute to autonomous learning (Lebler et al., 2009), which are required in a college setting.

Furthermore, there are variations in the ways that music students at tertiary level experience or understand learning. These range from focussing on the technical aspects of learning and copying teachers to a final conception where personal meanings are expressed through music (Reid, 2001). Students struggle as teaching approaches do not match the way they understand musical learning.

It is also observed that upon entering higher music education, young people typically aspire to be performers or composers. There is often a dip in self-esteem, self-efficacy, and motivation with an increase in anxiety in the first year as students realise that competition is fierce (Gaunt & Hallam, 2012). In the second year, students recover this confidence but become more realistic in their aspirations due to increased awareness of the profession's fiercely competitive nature. For those accepting that they are not going to pursue a performing career, this can negatively impact motivation and self-perception (Long, 2016).

There have been successful interventions that addressed these issues. For example, to help classically trained musicians used to the one-to-one model gain greater agency in their musical journey, it was found that reflective practice and journaling facilitated student autonomy, provided direction to learning and a sense of shared responsibility for learning through student–teacher collaboration (Carey et al., 2016). Taking an alternative approach from the highly authoritarian and conventional master-apprentice relationship, and shifting toward a model of increased autonomy in student learning may empower music students to take more initiative toward their direction of learning and thus improve motivation (Renwick & Reeve, 2012). There is also a call for teachers to shift towards a mentoring approach rather than merely instructing. Teachers had to learn to ask open questions that enable students to think reflectively about their artistic, personal, and professional development (Gaunt et al., 2012). Peer learning was also recognised as a powerful counterpart to mentoring in one-to-one student-teacher contexts as it strengthened aspects of a non-judgmental, safe learning environment (Gaunt et al., 2012).

So far, there has not been any research found in teaching and learning issues faced by conservatories in Asia. In designing this study and analysing the outcomes, the above ideas come into play and are considered in the YST context, located in Singapore.

## PROCESS

In planning this project, a nine-week programme comprising three phases was designed for sophomore students who fared poorly in aural skills, theory, and music history in their freshman year (Table 1).

1. **The initial phase** allowed students to discover their individual learning styles and identify areas to work on.
2. **The middle phase** incorporated individual and small-group meetings with assigned mentors to formulate and carry out a project to tackle these learning issues.
3. **The final phase** had students sharing their projects with the group.

Table 1

*Description of the nine-week programme*

The Initial Phase	Week 1	Through two questionnaires on learning styles and self-motivation as well as a sharing session, students reflected on their strengths, weaknesses and learning struggles at the conservatory.
	Week 2	Students started formulating their own project ideas through a project design template. This template was designed to help students set goals to improve both as a person and musician based on the previous session's reflections. Instructors gave feedback to ensure that goals set were specific.
The Middle Phase	Weeks 3-6	Students were coached on their self-designed project. For these coaching sessions, students/student groups were paired with one of the three instructors based on previous experience with the student, compatibility of personality, and suitability of individual expertise in relation to students' projects.
The Final Phase	Weeks 7-9	Students presented their projects to the entire group. They shared the processes involved and self-assessed their personal and musical growth throughout the project.

## OBSERVED PATTERNS AND OUTCOMES

After working closely with the project participants, it was apparent that grades were not an entirely accurate reflection of a student's level of mastery or struggle in a subject, but symptomatic of deeper motivational issues. This section elaborates on these issues and how the instructors intervened (see Appendix B for a full list of student profiles). Nicknames were given to all participants to maintain anonymity.

The motivational issues observed can be classified into:

1. Lack of certain skills or proficiencies
2. Problems with self-management and time-management
3. Personal issues

### *1. Lack of certain skills or proficiencies*

#### *Highlighted Case: Assumption of having implicit musical skills triggering insecurities*

Lydia is a motivated student who was doing well for most subjects but noticed a lack of harmonic skills which was affecting intonation. Lydia believed that harmony was complicated, mathematical, abstract, and disconnected from her more emotional experience with music. This could have been caused by the way the basics of the harmony had been taught to her. Lydia was frequently given generic suggestions such as 'just listen to the piano', or 'listen better', and though she tried her best, they did not work. These were not only unhelpful, but triggered insecurities such as the false perception of lacking talent in harmonic awareness.

A positive sign is that Lydia voluntarily applied for the programme to address her weakness in harmony. During individual coaching sessions, exercises focusing on local and global hearing<sup>1</sup> were introduced. Emphasis was placed on experiencing the relationship of the melody with the bass line and its consequences for intonation.

While Lydia worked very conscientiously on the exercises, a realistic timeframe was kept in mind and she was reminded not to expect immediate results. During the final presentation, Lydia showed how she applied what was learnt to the repertoire she was performing and shared that harmonic awareness was not limited by talent, but was a skill that could be learnt with the right steps taken.

#### *Highlighted Case: Students overwhelmed by non-musical skills*

A lack of certain basic skills or proficiencies unrelated to music but needed to do well in a music course can lead to a student feeling alienated in that course. At YST, courses are taught in English. However, for many YST students, English is not their first language. In fact, many have to take English remedial classes during orientation and their first year.

Mindy is extremely weak in English, to the point that it took her a long time to formulate thoughts into full sentences in English. Often, ideas were communicated by inserting a few foreign words to complete a sentence. During the individual coaching sessions, Mindy shared that to accomplish classroom tasks and activities, the primary struggle was to first overcome a language barrier before dealing with musical weaknesses, which was extremely tedious. Furthermore, it did not help that this was not immediately contributing to any improvement in playing skills, but instead was taking away precious time for instrumental practice.

During individual coaching, Mindy's own language was used in an effort to reach out. We also paired her with a Singaporean peer fluent in both English and Mandarin as a buddy to answer questions regarding

academic work and to practice speaking English for one hour weekly. In the project's final week, Mindy indicated feeling a higher level of motivation towards the academic subjects and feeling less alone.

## **2. Problems with self-management and time management**

### *Highlighted Case: Unrealistic expectations*

Many students enter YST as top musical talents in their previous institution or country. However, either prior to or shortly after entering YST, they experience difficulty maintaining this status because they are now among equally skilled, if not more outstanding peers.

Leila is a highly proficient erhu<sup>2</sup> player, but could not be admitted to YST to study that instrument as such a major does not exist. The student opted to study composition instead. In this new major, the feeling of no longer being considered a prodigy caused a struggle to find a new voice. Leila shared a desire to be successful but was unable to define what success meant, and therefore felt lost and unmotivated. Leila also had a parallel ambition of becoming a producer in popular music. These musical ambitions and activities conflicted with the studies and expectations of the typical conservatory composition major. These explain the self-identified feelings of insecurity towards career prospects leading to procrastination.

During the coaching sessions, Leila's mentor encouraged her to reflect and break down the generic goal of being successful into smaller tangible goals in three distinct areas: career, emotional, and immediate goals. These were then summarised in a 'goal book'. A comprehensive timetable and feedback loop to implement improvements were designed to realise these goals.

By actively thinking about both the timetable and goals and adjusting them during the process, Leila learnt to visualise a situation in the longer term in order to identify and set tangible goals. This has led to a sustained increase in motivation towards musical studies. Subsequently, Leila was encouraged by her composition teacher to enter a local song-writing competition. She won first prize, and has since switched her major from composition to production, which aligns better with her musical interests and goals.

### *Highlighted Case: Inefficient instrumental practice management*

Students who do well in both instrumental and academic studies are able to strike an effective balance of time commitment between practice and academic work. A prominent reason why this balance is not found with others is due to inefficient instrumental practice management.

Clarissa has trouble focusing whilst practicing, and is not able to manage her practicing time well. She experienced tension during practicing, but her problem-solving skills lacked specificity. This left her feeling frustrated and led to time consuming obsessive repetition. However, when prompted, she could be much more detailed and thus more effective. She was solving practice issues exactly as her teacher had told her to, but the idea of coming up with her own practice sequences was new.

In the programme, such students researched ways to focus and actively implemented them. They evaluated the usefulness of these methods and found it helpful to have warm-up routines, breathing exercises, and keeping a practice journal. They were also guided towards identifying sources of problems and devising practice etudes to solve them.



During their final presentations, these students shared that these new approaches were empowering as it made practice sessions effective and efficient. They added that it would take discipline to sustain such an approach.

#### *Highlighted Case: Lack of prior life-guiding experiences*

YST students are diverse, coming from all walks of life and varying educational systems. Some specialise in musical studies from a young age, perhaps with less exposure to an academically rigorous system. It is hence not unusual that some students lack experience in managing their time to meet the various academic expectations at YST.

Shaun missed most of his individual consultations and when queried, sincerely apologized that he had forgotten. He shared that he had also forgotten appointments with other teachers. Furthermore, he constantly felt exhausted and thus had trouble waking up in time for lessons. It eventually transpired that his personal schedule was filled to the very last minute with ambitious but generic goals, with no personal breaks and less than seven hours of daily sleep. He was repeatedly unable to stick to his schedule, let alone achieve his goals, and was therefore feeling defeated.

It is often assumed that college students have acquired the self-management skills required to handle the rigours of university life. It was not the case for these students, and this might unfortunately have led to them being misunderstood as having an attitude problem. In their final presentations, they shared how personal organisation was a life skill they learnt and had immediate positive effects on their well-being.

### **3. Personal issues**

#### *Highlighted Cases: Lack of confidence*

Confidence goes a long way in motivating students. Students with high self-efficacy have a history of “mastery experiences”, driving them to set goals towards more challenging achievements (Bandura, 2012). In contrast, students with musical experiences that created self-doubt or fear would have lower confidence levels, adversely affecting their drive. In this programme, we had two such instances.

Sarah was doing all the things she wanted to but the music was not convincing. Her mentor got her to try to use her imagination and to be rid of self-consciousness by daring to be ridiculous, which worked. She later shared that she was used to waiting to be told what to do as she believed her own initiative would not be good enough, which created a fear of tapping on her own imagination. Her mentor notes that it might have been a lack of confidence resulting in an overly critical inner voice that was preventing maximum focus.

Benny is a student who struggled with high absence rates and missing assignments. He shared that his principal teacher is highly critical, leading to feelings of anxiety. His mentor suspected that his coping mechanism was to behave like a class clown to endear himself to his peers. This manifested in flippant behaviour.

These two cases were a stark contrast to another two cases, who signed up for the programme on their own accord.

Govin and Dwayne are two exceptional students who chose to participate in the programme. They found they did not know how to sequence when teaching and they were speaking with unhealthy tone production respectively. Both Govin and Dwayne were already motivated students. They did not need answers, they needed to identify possibilities. They lit up when they saw the potentials of their projects and relevance to their future.

The latter two were aware of their strengths and weaknesses, with high levels of self-efficacy which enabled them to adopt a healthy growth mindset. As a result, they used the opportunity of participating in the programme to gain insights from mentors about personal projects they were undertaking that they could potentially develop further after graduation.

There was consensus among mentors that there was insufficient time (three individual consultations) to develop a trusting relationship with students to tackle the challenging and highly personal issue of a lack of self-confidence. In the case of Lydia, the first student mentioned in this section, some headway was made when she realised that taking her own initiative led to more inspired instrumental playing.

#### *Highlighted Cases: Weak at negotiating relationships*

Interpersonal relationships are an important aspect of a student's life at any music conservatory. Performance activities, usually the biggest focus of a music student's life, is related to numerous human relationships: with the individual teacher, his or her studio mates, and with peers in chamber ensembles and the orchestra. As such, difficulties in managing relationships can be detrimental to a student's attitude towards many aspects of their music studies.

Alan struggled with completing assignments. Additionally, his mentor, along with other faculty who had interacted with him, agreed that he faced difficulties in communication. He acted like the expert who would explain things to others, but was highly defensive. As such, classmates avoided working with him and teachers had a hard time getting across to him.

This project had limited effect on this student, as he was adamant and defensive, even after individual consultations, that he had no personal weaknesses to work on. Finally, he chose to research the topic of musicians dealing with stress. In his presentation, instead of reflecting on how the findings could help him, he pointed out how other students could benefit from his research. His mentor was left feeling that there were deeper unaddressed personal issues. It was later learnt through conversations with his department head, whom the student trusted, that he faced a host of family struggles that had led to communication difficulties. His department head shared that he had had meaningful conversations with both the student and his studio mates to help him face and overcome his difficulties. This suggests that the rapport between mentor and student, and time spent together within the student's familiar environment, are crucial to unpack complex personal issues.



## OUTLOOK

Based on the effectiveness of instructors' interventions in the project to address deeper motivational issues faced by students and drawing on evidence from research, there are three areas which inspire changes in teaching modes at YST. These areas are based on the authors' reflections and consensus upon evaluation of the project.

### ***1. Approach towards students***

#### *Putting aside assumptions of implicit ability*

In terms of students' feelings of insecurity at not being proficient at certain skills needed to be a good musician, these can be addressed by:

- Accurately identifying, accepting, and mediating the source of the insecurities to validate the students' feelings.
- Adopting a mastery-oriented mindset, which could alleviate students' preconceived limitations of themselves (Renwick & Reeve, 2012). This can be done by demystifying the subject and showing that progress is achievable by taking small and concrete steps.
- Having a large reservoir of faculty available for coaching and advising so that there are advisors with the appropriate authority on the content matter related to the problem.

#### *Buddy systems*

Encouraging peer learning within music conservatory contexts could be an effective learning alternative (Lebler, 2008) which fosters a more caring environment in a competitive conservatory (Gaunt et al., 2012). For example:

- Having academically stronger students with the appropriate personality guide academically weaker students within the classroom or studio.
- Creating space in the curriculum for senior students who are role models to coach their juniors, and proactively inviting alumni to mentor current students.

Such strategies were a motivational factor for struggling students and empowering for the stronger students.

### ***2. Strategies in advising***

#### *Setting flexible and accommodating goals*

There are many examples of musicians changing course midway through their studies or shortly after (Gaunt & Hallam, 2012). Students need to feel safe making significant career-changing decisions especially since their long-term goals might shift. Advisors could help by:

- Being aware and sensitive to such undergraduate students.
- Fostering a nurturing environment by proactively asking and being open-minded about their musical interests and goals beyond their major pathway.

#### *Finding the right fit of advisor*

It was hard to address personal issues, such as a student's confidence levels and their ability to negotiate interpersonal relationships, if instructors mentoring project participants did not have a strong prior

relationship with these students. Furthermore, gender and power issues may inhibit the necessary building of mutual trust (Gaunt & Hallam, 2012). This can be addressed by:

- Allowing students to choose their mentors and vice versa, instead of assigning mentors to mentees, which might yield higher compatibility rates. This involves finding a balance between putting all control with the student versus guiding and controlling too much (Carey et al., 2016).

### *Using a student's native language in advising*

English is YST's mode of instruction, hence students whose native language is not English may fall behind academically due to the language barrier, and possibly experience language anxiety (Zhang, 2001). For such students:

- They could be paired with advisors who communicate in the same native language. Cultural awareness would positively shape the nature of mentorship and affect student-faculty interaction (Schlosser et al., 2011).

### **3. Tweaks in curriculum**

#### *Tailoring to different levels of motivation in a class*

At YST, a challenge for teachers teaching group classes, whether in an instrumental studio or classroom setting, would be to accommodate students from diverse backgrounds of educational rigour. This can be overcome by:

- Implementing flipped classrooms and blended learning models in order to continue challenging inquiring students.
- Providing support in presentation skills or familiarisation with technological platforms (Boelens et al., 2018).
- Proactively reaching out and adapting expectations for struggling students (Boelens et al., 2018) by designing assignments with optional guidelines that academically weaker students may omit and extra credit options to challenge academically stronger students, without altering the assignment's basic learning objective.

#### *The need for modules to nurture efficient practice and self-management strategies*

Not all college students have acquired the requisite self-management skills to handle multiple expectations and the conservatory's packed academic schedule. To address this, learning to learn (Virkkula & Nissilä, 2017) may be an approach to consider, where systematic learning strategies can be applied to learning within music conservatories. For example:

- Developing good practicing habits not only helped them link analysis classes to their instrumental studies, it also freed up time for them to balance an instrumental focus with their academic studies.
- An effective application of reflective learning through a journaling process (Carey et al., 2016), to which subject major teachers and advisors have access to in order to offer timely intervention when necessary, could be an integral part of improving student wellness at YST.

## CONCLUSION

Figure 1 summarises the deeper issues behind students struggling at YST and possible solutions, backed by experimentation during the nine-week programme and research. However, it is not comprehensive given the small sample size. In taking this reflection forward in a future study:

- A larger student sample can be observed.
- The suggestions detailed above can be experimented in small doses to weed out teething issues and to observe its effectiveness before it is implemented on a wider scale.
- It was earlier mentioned that there has not been any research found regarding issues pertaining to student motivation in Asian conservatories. Implementing this project in other Asian conservatories, and then comparing it with this study or existing studies done in the UK and Australia, could reveal key cultural differences in motivational issues faced by conservatory students within and outside Asia.

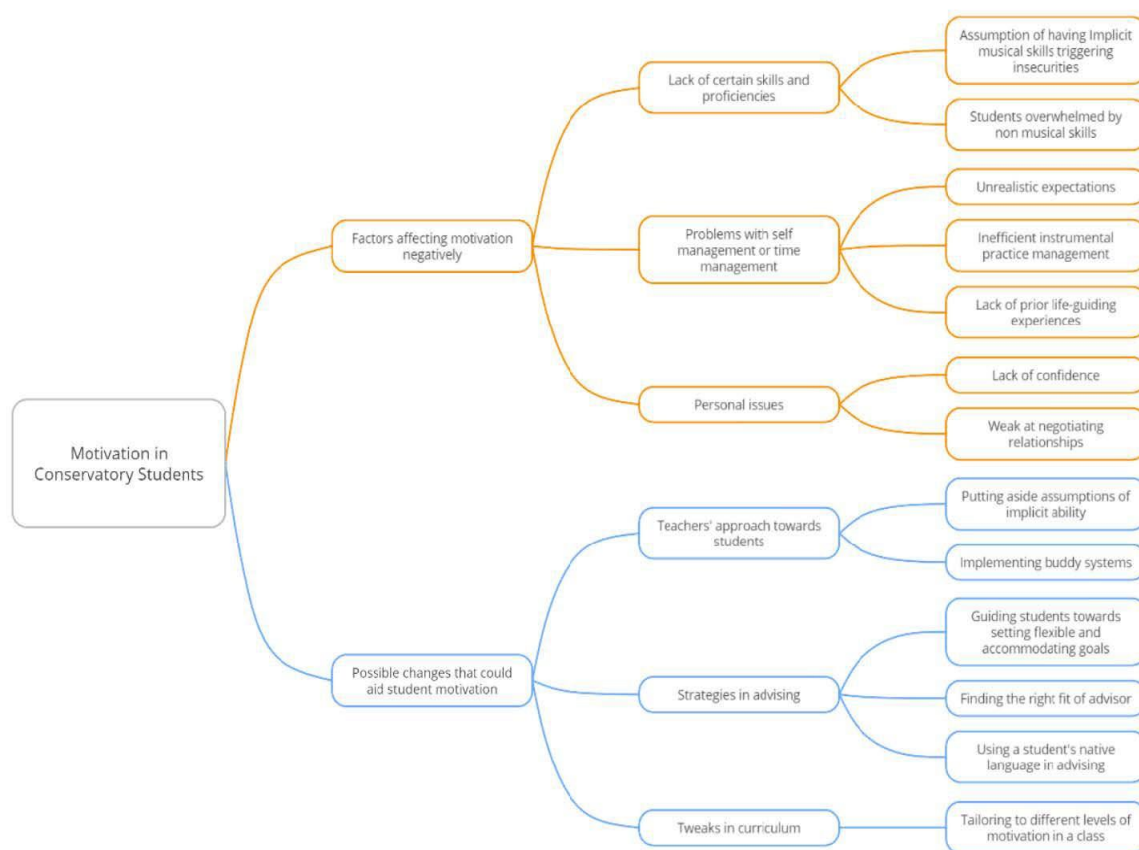


Figure 1. Summary of deeper issues that affect student motivation at YST and the potential solutions.

## ENDNOTES

1. Local and global hearing refer to relationships within the current harmony and longer-term relationships in the keys.
2. *Erhu* refers to a traditional Chinese instrument.

## APPENDIX A. COMPONENTS OF THE MUSIC MODEL OF ACADEMIC MOTIVATION (Jones, 2009)

## APPENDIX B. STUDENT PROFILES

### ABOUT THE CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

KHOO Hui Ling (Dr) is currently Lecturer at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music (YST), where she teaches modules in professional development, contextual studies and pedagogy and is also teaching assistant to Prof. Thomas Hecht. Having a strong conviction to positively impact the music teaching community, she serves as the Vice President of the Singapore Music Teachers' Association and is a member of the Executive Council of the Southeast Asian Directors of Music (SEADOM), through which she coordinates the SEADOM 30 Under 30 Project. Prior to her current teaching appointments, she has taught in various capacities at Nanyang Girls' High School in Singapore, the University of Oregon and the preparatory division of the Peabody Conservatory of Music.

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