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Izabela Wagner, "Producing Excellence. The Making of Virtuosos". New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2015, 296 pp.

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## Book Review

### **Izabela Wagner, “Producing Excellence. The Making of Virtuosos”. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2015, 296 pp.**

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The life of individuals reaching the peaks of professional success in various fields (sports, arts, science) is often inspiring material for bestseller biographies, telling the story of exceptional talents inevitably emerging, often quite early, notwithstanding hardship. Behind success stories, however, lies the hard work of a plurality of people, interacting within complex systems following specific rules and values. A sociological view may help to unveil this backstage process, showing how apparently inborn talents, not any differently from other professionals, grow within organizational fields and how their excellence is a social product resulting from a highly demanding and risky collective investment.

This is, in a nutshell, the main argument of the book on the career of violin soloists by Izabela Wagner, associate professor at the University of Warsaw. The sociological view she offers wears the glasses of the Chicago School, also recovered by J.-M. Chapoulie, Wagner’s supervisor at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales* in Paris for the writing of her PhD thesis, from which the book is drawn. The influence of this tradition can be traced, at a more general level, in the author’s sharing of its main theoretical and methodological tenets (the relevance of social structures and environmental factors, rather than genetic and personal features, in the shaping of human behavior; the focus on actors’ interactions; the appreciation of the richness brought by ethnographic investigation to qualitative analysis); at a more specific level, the reference points are Howard Becker’s studies on artistic work, influenced at their turn by Everett Hughes’ seminal essays on career making. In the book Hughes’ lesson directly flows from the source: this is noticeable from the subtitle (taking back his classic *The Making of a Physician* 1956) and in the consideration of career making as a process where education – also a collective work – plays a crucial role in socialization to a given profession, following a series of stages linked to the life cycle.

Another aspect shared by Wagner with several Chicago School scholars is the attention for the stylistic definition of the narrative, directly involving the reader into the subject. As in a thriller novel, her book is opened by an introduction (or “prelude”) titled *Scandal on the Stage*, describing the closing hours of an international violin competition. On stage for the closing concert we see the 16<sup>th</sup> years old Anastasia, beautifully playing a virtuoso piece, different from the one imposed by the jury in order to downplay her skills against the first prizes winners. The public responds enthusiastically, while a jury member from the backstage sentences: “*Her career is finished!*” [pp. 1-2]. The conflict between the two judgments is explained by their embeddedness within two different worlds (to use Becker’s concept), with complementary rules and values: that of the wider society, and that of its classical music élite. It is the latter, where violin soloists’ careers are rooted, that Wagner considers in her study, based on evidence collected since 1997 for a decade, integrating various qualitative methods: official and unofficial documents, formal and informal interviews with actors belonging to the field, ethnographic observation in soloist classes (in France, Germany and Poland) and in a dozen of international

competitions. The richness of the material particularly emerges in Wagner's dramatization of observations, when the setting of the scene and actors' interaction are described in minute detail, allowing the reader to follow not only external behavior, but also its emotional flow.

The book structure, by contrast, is sharply organized around three main stages through which the violin soloist career is produced. Adult career is perceived by virtuosos as the natural continuation of their student one, given the early age when it is started (usually less than five years). Early socialization of children to the classical music elite world is thus decided by parents and encouraged through a series of strategies (music listening, storytelling about famous performers) culminating with an audition to enter the class of a well-known music teacher assigning the "talented child" label and leading students to take the soloist-to-be role [Chapter 2]. This is the moment when a "faith mechanism" is activated, holding the whole process transforming in the span of twenty years talented children into soloists [p. 2]: on the one side, parents' ambition produces a belief in the ultimate success of their child, shared with the entourage supporting his/her education; on the other side, teachers accurately hide what might contradict this belief, as the plain consideration that "success is rare, even nearly impossible" [p. 190]. The instrumentally rational behavior adopted by the three main actors involved in the process – students, parents and teachers – therefore, ultimately lays over a basis of irrationality: this cognitive dissonance is composed through a constant maintenance and reinforcement of faith in ultimate success within the music elite world, fitting a logic reminiscent of Leo Festinger's and colleagues' findings on apocalyptic sects facing prophecy failure [1956].

The first stage of career making sees parents playing a pivotal role within the over mentioned triangular relationship: their presence during lessons is an active one, mediating between the teacher and their child, followed during daily practice at home. It is parents making the hard choices whose consequences are paid not only by the child (separated from the playful life of peers living in the "standard world"), but by the whole family (as for the migratory projects necessary to regularly attend lessons) and by parents themselves (sacrificing personal resources: money, professional goals, free time) [Chapter 3]. The validity of parental choices becomes questioned in the second stage [Chapter 4], when grown up students, once exited the protective "child prodigy" condition, adopt a critical look over their career: they become aware of family's investments over their professional future, feeling responsible just when dissatisfaction with their own performances and the strains of competition increase personal doubts over the feasibility of a soloist career. Parents' position in the triangular relationship weakens, while that between students and teacher strengthens within a "career coupling" mechanism, that is a dual and interdependent hierarchy of teacher making reputation and students making careers, each using the other as rungs on their respective professional ladder [p. 3]. It is the teacher, holding the most powerful position, who defines the nature of this asymmetrical relation of mutual need, translated in a variety of music class models, ranging from the "office" to the "torture chamber" one [pp. 85-93]. As career proceeds, students access new professional networks characterized by strong mobility and international culture, allowing them gradual emancipation from their old teacher. The third career stage [Chapter 5] sees students grown in self-confidence reinforcing the informal networks of support (made of accompanists, violin makers, professional agents) and seeking *patron-*

age, also needed to achieve a renowned instrument (desired for performance and professional distinction). Cooperation with the teacher does not break, but rather loosens and changes its nature: he/she turns into a guidance and a fundamental guest-pass for the exclusive élite music world club, as clearly illustrated by the mechanisms behind international competitions, where prize awarded to boost soloists careers also have the latent function of reinforcing values and power position within the field [pp. 173-183].

The dark side of Wagner's story on the making of virtuosos is that only a small number of soloist class students succeed in completing the career cycle, and – the author suggests – not necessarily the best ones. All others have to cope with an often frustrating professional conversion, readjusting to musical careers considered as second-best by the virtuoso élite (concertmaster in orchestras, university music professors) or even turning (more rarely, given early specialization in their education) to non musical professions. In the sixth and last chapter Wagner clarifies why this part of the story is seldom told: because faith in ultimate success is the fuel nurturing the system of musical excellence production, silence on its glitches becomes vital to its survival. Exit from the élite music world is therefore facilitated by the system through a “cooling the mark out” process [Goffman 1952], where career failure is individualized as relative to students' musical shortcomings, although far more often inherent to the system's selection process [pp. 190-191].

Chapter 6 also offers a summary inventory of “auxiliary characteristics to become a successful soloist” (adaptability to unstable conditions of performance; the “stage reflex”; appropriate looks; physical and psychological resistance, among others) [pp. 201-211]. Here Wagner recalls again Hughes, directly quoting his *Dilemmas and Contradictions of Status* [1945]: however, while his article dealt with configurations of expected status working as informal mechanisms of professional recruitment, her book lists the non musical features young musicians need to possess to cope with the three stage cycle. Thereupon, in the first case professional marginalization is reported to the individual's belonging to social groups subject to stratification, while in the second one to personal features allowing (or, for those lacking them, hampering) to cope with the process of professional socialization. In so doing, Wagner brings back the dynamic role of individual agency within a theoretical framework otherwise centered on the static power of the field structure, an attempt which unfortunately remains only sketched. A further development, in fact, would probably have allowed to better frame theoretically some interesting issues raised throughout the book: as for the demand/supply dynamic in the virtuoso education and the relative variation of migratory paths; or for the link between social desirability of musical professions and ethnical or national identity; finally, in the interpretation of the “happy ending” concluding the book, where the fact that the young Anastasia manages to maintain the path of excellence in her soloist career despite jury's anathema (and thus against the system's rules) is reported to the “strong belief in her power and future, the most important factors in soloist success,” but also to her “temper, character, and [...] strong personality” [pp. 220-221].

As several sociologist writing about music worlds (among others Becker and Paul DiMaggio, signing the book endorsements reported in the cover) Wagner is herself deeply embedded within the field studied: she was raised and educated in a family of musicians, studied and taught music and became the mother of a vi-

olin soloist. Her inquiry thus moves after Pierre Bourdieu's consideration of sociology as a means to discover the evident truth, often so obvious that it was part of us [p. 214]. In the appendix she reports with rare intellectual honesty the methodological *pros* and *cons* deriving from this "embedded researcher" condition (as the tension between attachment to the field and distance required to study it) and tells about the practical and emotional strains linked with conducting research implying a deep involvement into the more intimate aspects of people's lives. Hopefully her book will help in proving artistic careers as a significant research field not only for sociologist of arts and culture, but also of education and work.

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