

Episode 7: The I Word

Intro

Hello and welcome to Tonal Diversions. I'm your host, Lori Archer Sutherland, and this is my journey as a multifaceted musician. I'm a composer, clarinetist and more who is navigating the world of is classical music, and I'd love to share my adventures with you.

Episode proper

Imposter syndrome, self doubt, and more. Pretty much every artist goes through this. You are not alone.

Just get it started

This episode was surprisingly difficult to start. I want to talk about this kind of kind of stuff as it's part of my journey. Yet to sit down and decide what to say really stymied me. I had been thinking of all kinds of things to help me procrastinate: laundry, dishes, social media, games on my phone, playing with the cats... The list goes on. Just as I was writing some notes about this part of the show, the dishwasher signaled that it was done with its cycle, and I decided that I had to get up and take care of it *right that second*.

I've produced several episodes of the show now, so my difficulty isn't related to that. Even this topic shouldn't be a big deal. I don't feel like I've necessarily hidden my feelings on this topic. It's been a puzzling mental block. So where is the resistance coming from? Perhaps this feels more public in a way. Or maybe I'm just having imposter syndrome about talking about imposter syndrome. That sounds crazy enough to be possible, so maybe I'll just go with that.

What is "imposter syndrome?"

In case you're one of the few people who haven't heard about imposter syndrome, it's when you doubt your abilities and that you're really just a fraud and everyone will realize it. To quote Maya Angelou, "I have written eleven books, but each time I think, oh, they're going to find out now. I've run a game on everybody and they're going to find me out." She sums it up perfectly.

While a lot of focus has been on how this affects women, it's definitely not limited to just us. So many people are affected by this at some point in their life. In a Hidden Brain podcast episode, Shankar Vedantum interviewed Kevin Cokley about the phenomenon and how it affects a lot of us. I highly encourage you to go listen to the episode. It's really informative, and I will link to it in the show notes.

In looking up information for this episode, I came across the work of Dr. Valerie Young, who has identified five different types of imposter syndrome. Because we don't have to deal with just one, now we have five types of it! I definitely saw myself reflected in a few of them. While I won't go into detail about each one, here are the names of each of the five. There's the perfectionist, the superwoman, the natural genius, the soloist, and the expert. I'll also link to this in the show notes. I recommend you go look at that, too, because I thought it was interesting to break it into the different whys of feeling imposter syndrome.

Background

Growing up, I struggled with a lot of self-esteem and self-confidence issues. I know there's a lot of fodder for therapy in there. While I've improved in that regard over the years, and as I've gotten older, some things do still sneak up on me. That history definitely affects the whys and hows of dealing with imposter syndrome for me as an adult, and I'm still figuring all of this out myself.

I'm sure some of these feelings are also because of taking the leap into being a full-time musician. Before, it was really easy to hide behind my job as a librarian and talk about doing music on the side. But now I'm a composer, a musician. Those are my titles, those are my jobs now. And I can't just say, oh, well, it's just a side thing. The thing is, I was doing music alongside my library job this whole time, so I've been learning and practicing for many years. I have experience. It's just that taking the official statement of "I am a composer" that it really does bring up some of these feelings.

Starving artists

It doesn't help that there's a lot of societal baggage that goes along with being a fulltime artist. The starving artist stereotype is prevalent, even though lots of people make their living from the arts. There's also the notion that the arts is not a real job, despite the fact that people turn to the arts every day. They listen to music, they watch TV and movies, they buy mugs and jigsaw puzzles and tote bags with artwork on them. I do think society's expectations play in all of this too, especially because we seem to demand perfection from artists more publicly than we do in some other professions. When we see people criticize things for not meeting some ideal, it's easy to think that if our art isn't perfect, then why bother doing it at all? Especially if we dare to try to make a living at it.

Next steps

So what do we do about it? For me, knowing that so many others deal with us, it helps. There are plenty of resources to read, listen to, and watch about this very topic. And as I said before, I will be linking to some things in the show notes that I have found helpful, and hopefully you will too.

I need to just keep doing the thing. For me, that thing is creating and performing music. While I try to do my best, I also acknowledge that things don't have to be perfect and they can't be. What's perfection in music? It's not something you can measure, despite what we tell ourselves. To paraphrase Gabriel Fauré, "Don't try to be a genius in every measure." I want to write good music, but I'm also not trying to be Beethoven or Mozart. There is room for me and my work for the audience I'm writing it for.

Another one of my tools is to remember the man in the arena quote by Theodore Roosevelt. *"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great*

devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat." I try to remember that at least I'm in the arena, trying to create. It's really easy to sit on the sidelines and talk about things and criticize, but I'm actually going in there and writing music.

I'd like a quote I heard recently from Tunde Oyeyin, "If you have imposter syndrome, you probably are worthy." Let that sink in for a minute. It puts a different positive spin on the whole thing. It encourages me to embrace the fear instead of hide from it.

One last trick is to remind myself of my successes. Honestly, I struggle with this. It's not that I don't appreciate something in the moment, because I do, But I don't often remember to look back over the course of a period of time, say a month or a year, to remind myself of good things that have happened or things that I've accomplished. I think because I feel the need to just keep moving on and creating more that I don't just take the time to look back and say, "Hey, I've done a lot of stuff." I've at least started keeping a sort of digital scrapbook with previous wins. So now I just need to remind myself to go look back at that now and then.

Conclusion

Part of being a musician is dealing with things that are tangential to the actual act of making music, whether it's performing, composing, or teaching. We encounter things like imposter syndrome and have to figure out how to work through it. I feel it's good to talk to others about it and share our struggles and not just show the perfect part of being a creator or whatnot. So I ask you, do you have additional ways to cope with imposter syndrome? I would love to add more tools to my toolkit as I deal with this. And I hope that some of this has helped you, too. So please feel free to reach out at podcast@tonaldiversions.com. Until next time.

Outro

Thank you for listening to Tonal Diversions subscribe wherever podcasts are found and share with a friend until next time. Bye!