



THE CONFESSIONS OF A MUSIC ADDICT

By Gabor Maté M.D.

It's well known that adults with attention deficit disorder, much more than the general population, are prone to all kinds of addictions, from nicotine to alcohol to cocaine to gambling and other behavioral addictions. As an adult with ADD, I'm familiar with the pattern myself. From a brain biology perspective, the reason for this addiction-proneness is quite straightforward. ADD involves a relative lack of dopamine, an essential chemical messenger substance in the brain's incentive-motivation circuitry. It's to supplement that paucity of dopamine that we prescribe dopamine-enhancing medications like Ritalin or Dexedrine or their various relatives. It so happens that all substances of abuse have as their initial action the increasing of brain dopamine levels in the incentive-motivation centres. It's also what behavioral addictions do, so just as the drug addict the behavioral addict is hooked on external sources of dopamine, the behavior addict is also hooked on the dopamine--his or her own--that the addictive behavior releases in the brain. This is

true for eating addictions, gambling, sex addiction, compulsive shopping or any other behavior that takes on addictive qualities.

In turn, addictive behaviors play havoc with one's personal life and increase the stress on the adult with ADD, which exacerbates the ADD symptoms. It's a negative spiral we need to quit. The first step is to acknowledge the addiction and to become aware of it's negative impact on your life.

How to recognize if you have a behavioral addiction? In the following excerpt from a book on addiction I'm currently writing, I give a case example. My own.

I'm on my way to St. Paul's Hospital where, in addition to my other work, I provide medical care to psychiatric inpatients. But it's not work that's on my mind. My pulse quickens as I drive past Sikora's, one of North America's great classical music emporiums. I park and, with fast steps, approach the store. I take a deep breath. I enter. Agitating my mind and body are thoughts of a CD of operatic favourites by the tenor Rolando Villazón. I listened to selections yesterday when I went to the store to pay off my latest debt,

but resisted the temptation. Today it clamors that I return for it. I must have it and I must have it now. The desire first arises as a thought and rapidly transforms itself into a concrete object in my mind, with a weight, heaviness, a pull. It generates an irresistible gravitational field. The tension is relieved only when I succumb. It's surely what Twelve-Step groups mean when they utter their first mantra, "I am powerless..."

An hour later, I leave Sikora's with the Villazón disc, and several others. Hello. My name is Gabor, and I am a compulsive classical music shopper. I've been in Sikora's several times a week in the past two months. As of now, mid-March, I've blown two thousand dollars on classical CDs since New Year's. I've broken my word to stop bingeing, pledged with maximal contrition to my wife Rae after my thousand dollar pre-Christmas and Boxing Day splurge. Day in, day out I've obsessed about what music to get. I've expended countless hours, hours that could have been devoted to writing or to family, poring over write-ups at Internet classical music sites. As soon as the reviewer says something like "no self-respecting lover of symphonic/

AD/HD: UNDIAGNOSED + UNTREATED = UNFORTUNATE

choral/piano music should be without this set," I'm done for.

Suddenly I cannot imagine my life without this Dvorak symphony cycle or that version of Bach's B-minor Mass, or this interpretation, on period instruments, of Haydn's Paris Symphonies. I cannot abide another moment without Rachmaninov's Preludes, or Le Nozze di Figaro, Bahianas Brasileiras, a collection of Shostakovich's chamber music; yet another fourteen-CD version—my fifth—of Wagner's Ring Cycle; new issues of Bach's solo violin or solo cello pieces.

Beethoven composed thirty-two piano sonatas. I own five complete recordings of them—having discarded twice as many, some repurchased and relinquished more than once. Stored away somewhere in our attic are two sets I will never listen to again. If this very moment I were to begin to play the collected Beethoven on my shelves--and if I did nothing else--it would take me weeks to hear it all. And that's just Beethoven.



Many CDs on my shelves have made only a cursory visit to my stereo's disc drive, if I've heard them at all. Others languish

orphaned, never having been listened to.

Rae is suspicious. "Have you been obsessing and buying?" she has asked me a number of times in the past few weeks. I look directly at my life partner of thirty-six years and I lie. I tell myself I don't want to hurt her. Nonsense. I fear losing her affection. I don't want to appear bad in her eyes. I'm afraid of her anger. That's what I don't want.

I've given hints—almost as if I wanted to be caught. "You look stressed," Rae remarks one evening in early January. "Yes, it's all these CDs," I begin to reply. My embarrassment is palpable. "I mean, all these CVs I have to e-mail regarding my speaking engagements." My recovery is clumsy. I'm guilty as sin and I must look it. How I manage to escape is beyond me. For a moment, I consider confessing, as, eventually, I always do.

The following week, over morning coffee, I look up from the newspaper. "Ah," I tell Rae, "the Vancouver Opera is producing Don Giovanni in March." "Don Giovanni," she muses, "I don't know that one. What's it about?"

"The Don Juan story. The obsessive womanizer. He's this creative, charming and energetic man. His relentless erotic passion, no matter how often it's consummated, leaves him restless and dissatisfied. He always seeks more. Plus, his poetic talent and his drive for mastery only serve his insatiable need to possess. A

daring adventurer, but morally a coward. He finds no peace within. It's always about the next acquisition—he keeps a notebook listing his amorous conquests. He is given many cautions, many opportunities for salvation, but he spurns them all. He torments and wounds others and sacrifices his own mortal soul. To the end he scorns repentance and is dragged down to Hell."

Rae glances at me with something like surprise—or is it a knowing smirk? "You told that so eloquently," she says. "You brought the character alive. He's obviously close to your heart."

"Oh, Rae," I think. "If only you knew how near you are to the truth. I've purchased four versions of this Mozart masterpiece in the past month, adding to the two already in my collection. I've never listened to any of them from start to finish. And I've deceived you actively, by denying it, or passively, by withholding it. I've broken my promises, and will continue to do so. A small time Don Giovanni, the faithless lover. I cheat with operas, not with women."

Music releases streams of emotion in me that, in the rest of my life, I dammed up long ago. So, yes, I am passionate about it—but I'm also addicted, which is an altogether different matter.

Addictions, even as they resemble normal human yearnings, are more about desire than about attainment. In the addicted mode, the emotional charge is in the pursuit

and the acquisition of the desired object, not in the possession of it. The greatest pleasure is in the momentary satisfaction of yearning, the evanescent euphoric high.

In my addicted mode, the music still thrills, but it cannot release me from the need to pursue, to have and to experience more and more. Its fruit is not joy but disaffection. With each CD I delude myself that now my collection will be rounded and complete. If only I could have it, only this time, only one more, I could rest satisfied. So runs the illusion. I barely leave the store before the adrenalin pumps through my circulation again, my mind fixated on the next purchase.



When you get right down to it, it's the adrenaline I'm after, along with dopamine and the other precious reward chemicals that will flood my brain when I hold the new CD in hand, providing an all too temporary reprieve from the stress of my driven state. Everyone addicted to any kind of pursuit, whether sex or gambling or shopping, is after

that same fix of home-grown chemicals.

This behaviour has been recurring for decades, since my children were –

Wait. "The behaviour has been recurring?" What a neat way to put it outside myself, as if it lived as an independent entity. I have been doing this for decades, since my children were small.

Many years, I was spending thousands of dollars on compact discs. Dropping a few hundred dollars in an hour or two was no chore. My all-time record for expenditure came close to eight thousand dollars in one week. I was cushioned from economic disaster by the income I earned as a self-sacrificing—(read workaholic)--physicians much admired by the world. It was easy for me to justify all the spending as compensation for the hard work I was doing: one addiction providing an alibi for the other.

Any passion can become an addiction; but then how to distinguish the two? The central question is who is in charge: the individual or the behaviour? One can rule a passion; an obsessive passion one does not rule is an addiction.

The addiction is the repeated behaviour one keeps engaging in despite knowing that it harms oneself or others. How it looks externally is irrelevant. The key issue is one's internal relationship to it.

If in doubt, ask yourself one simple question: given the harm

you are doing to yourself and others, are you willing to stop? If not, you are addicted. If you are unable to renounce the behaviour, or unable to keep your pledge when you do, you are addicted.

There is, of course, a deeper, more ossified layer to addictions: the denial state in which, contrary to all reason and all evidence, you refuse to acknowledge that you are hurting yourself or anyone else. In the denial state you are completely resistant to asking yourself any questions at all. But if you do want to know, look around you. Are you closer to the people you love after your passion has been fulfilled, or more isolated? Have you come more truly into who you are, or are you left hollow?

I lose myself when caught in one my addictive spirals. Gradually, I feel an ebbing of moral strength. I experience myself as hollow. Emptiness stares out from behind my eyes. I fear that even my friends at Sikora's, who sell me the CDs, can see through my thin mask. There is nothing behind the façade but an organism palpitating for instant gratification. Not a music lover, but an abject weakling stands before them. I sense they pity me.

I become increasingly and reflexively critical, irritable, and righteous with my teenaged daughter. The more I indulge myself, the more judgmental I am towards her. I cannot be optimistic and believe in her growth and development when I know I am sabotaging my own.

How can I see the best in her when I'm blind to all but the worst in myself? Our interactions are tense. At age seventeen, she is at no loss for words or body language with which to communicate her discomfort.

My relationship with Rae loses vitality. Because my internal world is dominated by obsession, I have little to say and what I do say rings hollow in my own ears. Because my attention is pulled inwards, the interest I offer her becomes dutiful rather than genuine. When I'm in one of my addictive cycles, it's almost as if I were engaged in a sexual affair, with all the attendant obsession, lying, and manipulation.

Above all, I'm absent. You cannot be fully present when you are putting up walls to keep from being seen. There is an unavoidable cost in intimacy and spontaneity. Something's got to give.

Dr. Maté is a Vancouver physician, author, speaker and counselor, the author of three books including *Scattered: How Attention Deficit Disorder Originates and What You Can Do About It*.
www.drqabormate.com
