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Psychological aspects of musical practice.

How to be more effective and successful as a musician and teacher by using non-musical resources

Research presented in this thesis, conducted by psychologists in various domains, gives clear evidence that the human psyche is a powerful determinant of one's achievements. Across many disciplines, the same psychological factors play an important role by either impairing or supporting one's efforts. Therefore they should be recognized as an essential part of musical practice and worked on to serve a musician on his or her way to mastery. Motivation is the basis for all possible actions, and is absolutely vital in the process of learning any complex skill – playing an instrument included. For this reason musicians should learn to control their motivation levels, to skillfully use numerous available methods that help one to cope with motivational highs and lows, and to make their students aware of the multitude of tools which ensure that their musical activities are truly enjoyable and worth pursuing.

The ability to achieve flow also seems useful for musicians and can be seen as the perfect state for playing to one's full potential during practice. Intensive involvement in the activity not only captures one's full attention, but also leaves one feeling energized, capable of managing difficulties, and waiting for the next such enjoyable experience. What is more, since practice can be seen in many cases as preparation for a situation of public performance, improving its quality can automatically help an individual to act similarly on stage. Being focused, observant, ready to respond to feedback and fully immersed in one's own playing can help to lessen the feelings of anxiety and self-consciousness during a performance.

The way one thinks – as complex as it is – can also be consciously chosen and worked on. The deeply ingrained, recurring thoughts that create one's beliefs about literally everything have the power of making a musician's practice effective, if they are positive, empowering and encouraging. When one has a negative view of oneself, their beliefs tend to sabotage one's efforts. It is difficult to improve anything and every mistake or imperfection in one's playing turn into a proof of one's inability to achieve desired results. What is more, an individual's beliefs about musical talent and intelligence affect not only his or her behaviour – how much time and energy one invests in practice, how one responds to any failures – but also one's priorities. The fixed mindset may cause one to think: 'I want to be seen as talented', and as a result choose unchallenging pieces and 'play it safe', which will never allow to accomplish what one really could.

By gaining control over one's thoughts, one can also ensure that no negative emotions or disempowering states are going to occur during practice. Being able to put oneself in a state which lets one work in a calm, concentrated way – possibly leading to the state of flow – is an important skill for anyone who devotes as much time as musician does to becoming good at an activity. Also the ability to quiet any disturbing self-talk and staying process-oriented while practicing, without judgemental comments, is what helps to make practice effective. As thoughts are closely related to posture and breathing, one should consider learning a method which helps to maintain an optimal posture without tensions but with the necessary balanced tonus, as well as one which raises one's awareness

of breathing. Consciously improving these two elements is going to affect positively many other aspects of one's musical practice.

Moreover, it turns out that specific beliefs and mental habits are responsible for differences between optimists and pessimists, making a person either more likely to persevere or to give up. They influence one's levels of energy and the way one sees mistakes and failures as well as successes. Optimists tend to stay motivated and have a strong sense of self-belief, which helps them to persistently follow their chosen activities, keep working and eventually succeed.

All these psychological aspects can be developed by a musician to his or her

advantage, but the beginning of this process is rooted in awareness and attention. Becoming more aware of what is really happening during practice by learning how to observe, listen attentively and take the reality as feedback – without being fixated on what is right or wrong – is the first step to noticing, where changes are really needed. It is likely that advanced musicians have learned to manage their psyche successfully over the course of their time playing music, and only little improvements may be necessary to help them increase the effectivity of their practice. Many music students though need their teachers' help when learning how to practise in order to achieve desired results as quickly as possible, to remove obstacles and to develop in an optimal way. This is why it is useful even for advanced musicians to learn more about the psychological aspects of effective practice. If they are not only experts in this field, but also inspire, encourage and support others on their way to this invaluable know-how, they can certainly see themselves as truly great musicians.

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