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Achieving and Maintaining Flow During Practice and Performance

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What is Flow?

- Referred to as being “in the zone.”
- A state of total absorption in an activity where an individual’s skill and control are in balance and the individual is operating at or near their optimal level of performance.
- Promotes a loss of self-awareness, change in perception of time, ability to play effortlessly, and creates a sense of calm and confidence.

Flow Function During Flow

- Flow is associated with many functions of the prefrontal cortex including emotion, reward processing, decision making, and the coordination of action and thoughts as they align with intrinsic goals.
- During flow, oxygenated hemoglobin (oxy-Hb) concentration, a chemical complex that transports oxygen to the tissues, significantly increases in both the right and left prefrontal cortices and right and left frontal polar areas (the front most area of the prefrontal cortex responsible for supporting goal-directed behavior).
- The increase of oxy-Hb supports heightened brain activity in the prefrontal cortex during flow.

Facilitating Flow Experiences Among Musicians

Objectives

- The study was conducted to determine whether different individual and demographic factors including age, musical ability, gender, goals, and self-confidence influence instrumentalist’s ability to achieve flow during performance.

Method:

- Participants consisted of 90 adult classical instrumental musicians who have been playing their instrument for an average of 36 years and identified five goals for their practice session.
- Subjects completed a written mail-in survey containing numeric ratings and write-in items about their experiences of flow while playing an instrument.
- Five elements were required for responses to be considered a flow experience: (a) the experience stood out as a special musical experience, (b) the experience involved total absorption while playing, (c) goals were clear before beginning to play, (d) evidence of confidence in task accomplishment and (e) attention was focused on playing the music rather than task-relevant thoughts.

Results:

- Five key predictors of flow experiences were identified: 1. Self-confidence and self-trust while practicing and performing 2. Desire to experience and express feelings through music 3. Having experienced achieving performance or musical goals 4. Ability to maintain mental focus during performance 5. Ability to perform without self-criticism.

- Gender, age, experience, and ability showed no direct impact on flow experiences. However, data hinted at positive feelings of self-confidence and self-trust while performing being related to the individual’s proficiency: number of the years playing.

- The five most popular themes of specific musical flow experiences:
  1. Complete absorption and heightened awareness (36 responses)
  2. Emotional experiencing (19 responses)
  3. Sense of connection with others (17 responses)
  4. Sense of effortlessness (19 responses)
  5. Sense of transcendence (12 responses)

- 12% of participants reported flow experiences occurring during sight reading.
- 45% reported experiencing flow in “creative” activities (social, sport, artistic, playing non-musical games, thinking, listening to music for fun), and “maintenance activities” (eating, personal care, chores/errands, retail, and travel).

Conclusion:

- Results indicate musical flow experiences in playing and performance are facilitated by factors that reach beyond matching task challenge with skill level, making the exact impact of age, gender, and ability difficult to decipher.

Brain Function During Flow

- Flow is a state of consciousness with the absence of conscious awareness of time or space.
- Flow is associated with many functions of the prefrontal cortex including emotion, reward processing, decision making, and the coordination of action and thoughts as they align with intrinsic goals.
- Flow experiences occur when the individual is absorbed in an activity.
- Flow experiences are associated with increased activity in the prefrontal cortex.
- Flow experiences are associated with decreased activity in the amygdala.

Flow Theory and the Development of Performance Skills

Objective:

- This study explores the relationship between flow theory and young musicians’ development of performance skills.

- The main question of this study is: To what extent do flow experiences account for differences in the musical performance levels of young musicians spend practicing and their levels of performance achievement?

Method:

- Participants consisted of 60 young musicians, 21 males and 39 females ages 12-16 yrs. old. 40 students attended a selective specialist music school and 20 students attended a non-specialist state school.
- The 20 students attended a non-specialist state school. First, the students were divided into three groups based on music performance level and age维度: 1) young musicians; 2) young musicians with less performance achievement experience and express feelings through music 3. Having experienced achieving performance or musical goals 4. Ability to maintain mental focus during performance 5. Ability to perform without self-criticism.

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Conclusion:

- Results showed students who were high achieving students at the specialist music school and students at the non-specialist school experienced more periods of flow than non-flow when participating in musical activities. However, the lower achieving students from the specialist music school showed experienced more instances of non-flow than flow. This may be attributed to a lack of confidence or feelings of inadequacy felt by less successful musicians to the more successful students in their school. The evaluative context of a specialist school may cause students to feel more capable by the school’s standards. What these conclusions indicate is both the importance of confidence in producing flow as well as the importance of music educators instilling confidence and fostering motivation in their music students, regardless of skill level.