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 risk and skill are in balance and the individual is operating at an optimal level.

Refers to a state of mental focus and involvement in the activity at hand. It is characterized by a sense of enjoyment, relaxation, and detachment from the self. It is often associated with a sense of personal control and mastery.

Objectives

1. Define the concept of flow

2. Discuss the necessary components for achieving flow

3. Identify the benefits of achieving flow

4. Discuss the challenges of maintaining flow

5. Explore strategies for entering into flow

Top 5 Tips for Entering into Flow During Practice and Performance

1. Set an intention: Choose one goal for the performance. Ex: “I want to play from start to finish without mistakes.”

2. Deep breathing exercises: Breathe in through the nose for 6 seconds, hold breath for 7 seconds, and exhale quickly through the mouth. Repeat as many times as desired.

3. Positive self-talk: Say short phrases or mantras to center oneself and provide confidence before a performance. Ex: “Release tension,” “I’m ready,” and “calm, confident, controlled.”

4. Short progressive relaxation sequence:

   - Relax the muscles in one area of your body (face, bicep, quadriceps, or calf) as tight as you can for 7 seconds, then slowly release this tension area. Repeat for 10 seconds. Repeat the exercise 2–3 times on the same muscle group.

5. Visualization:

   - Imagine the atmosphere, the lighting, the feeling of the heat of the lights on your skin, and the layout of the room. Visualize successfully performing the music, as having a clear internal vision and plan for achieving your desired musical interpretation.

   - Commitment: Knowing exactly what you are doing and how you are going to do it, as having a clear internal vision and plan for achieving your desired musical interpretation.

   - Confidence: Believing in yourself and your abilities.

   - Focus: Maintaining concentration on the task at hand.

   - Arterial oxygen transport: Oxygenated hemoglobin (oxy-Hb) concentration, a chemical complex that transports oxygen to the tissues, significantly increases in both the right and left prefrontal cortex and right and left frontal polar areas (the frontmost area of the prefrontal cortex responsible for supporting goal-striving functions).

   - The increase of oxy-Hb supports heightened brain activity in the prefrontal cortex during flow.

Necessary Components in Achieving Flow in Practice and Performance

- One must be physically and mentally in a quiet atmosphere or state of solitude.
- Meditating, focused breathing, and developing a pre-performance routine can aid in encouraging a sense of calm and help achieve flow during performance.
- Short progressive relaxation techniques are the three most essential components in achieving flow.
- Attention: Paying attention to what is occurring during performance, through sound (volumes, rhythms, duration), sight (color, movement, expression, and meaning of the music), and through emotion and imagery (emotional aspects of playing, and images implied by the music). Feelings (acknowledging feelings experienced within oneself or in the music), and understanding (form, harmony, text, function, and meaning of the music).
- Commitment: Knowing exactly what you are doing and how you are going to do it, as well as having a clear internal vision and plan for achieving your desired musical interpretation.
- Trust: Trust in your preparation for the performance, “letting go” to the music, placing focus on musical expression, and internally singing the melodic line.

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 performance quality 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 years old. 40 students attended a selective specialist music school and 20 students attended a non-specialist state school.

- The non-specialist school consisted of students with intermediate to high musical performance ability, and the specialists school contained students with the three most essential components in achieving flow.

- Subjects completed a written mail-in survey containing numeric ratings and written-in items about their experiences of flow while playing an instrument.

Results:

- Five key predictors of flow were identified: 1. Self-confidence and self-trust while practicing and performing 2. Desire to express and enjoy feelings in music 3. Having experienced achieving performance or musical goals 4. Ability to maintain mental focus during performance and consistently practice seven or more hours per week.

- Twenty students from the non-specialist school were selected by the school’s head of music as the most musically active students.

- Each student participated in an experiment involving twenty activities. Each time the survey was administered, the students were asked to indicate the number of times they would participate in each activity.

- Results indicated that students from the non-specialist school and high achievers from the specialist school reported significantly more flow experiences than moderate achievers from the specialist school, and students with high musical achievement from the specialist school.

Conclusion:

This study found students who were high achievers 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 achievers from the specialized music school 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’ students than the more successful students in their school. The evaluative context of a specialized school causes students to feel less municipally to 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.