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Achieving and Maintaining Flow During Practice and Performance

Jenna Klein
University of Northern Iowa

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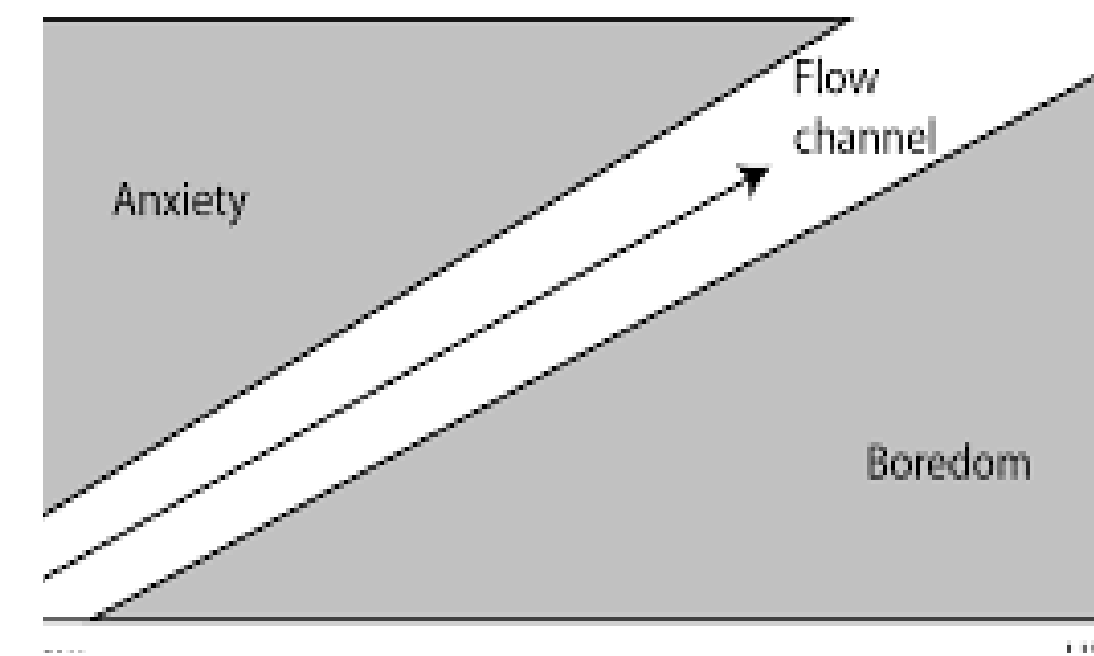
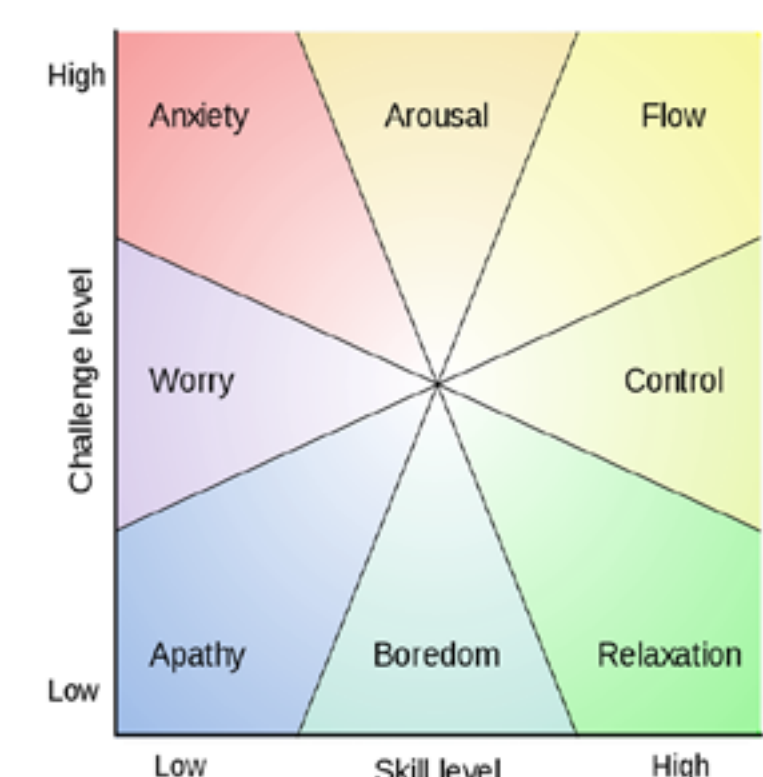
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Achieving and Maintaining Flow During Practice and Performance in Music

Jenna Klein, University of Northern Iowa Candidate for MM in Piano Performance and Pedagogy

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 peak performance.
- Promotes a loss of self-awareness, change in perception of time, ability to play effortlessly, and creates a sense of calm and confidence.



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 from memory at medium tempo,” or “I want to successfully play all of the dynamics from memory,” or “I want to create a long, lyrical line with the melody throughout the middle section.”

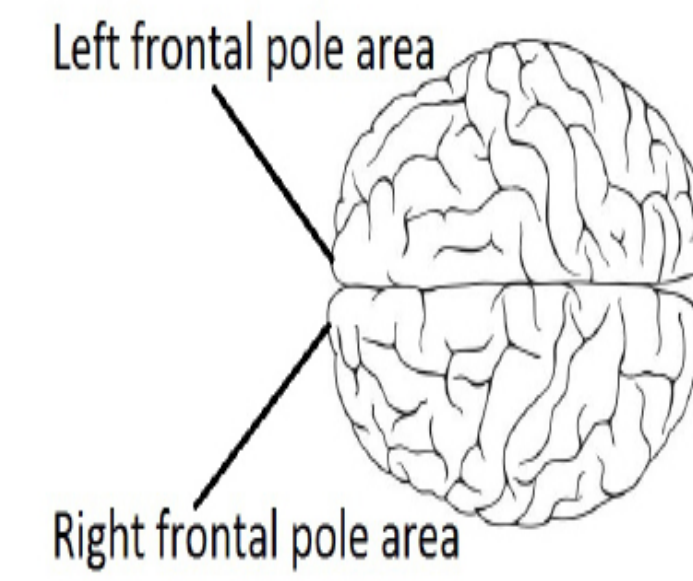
2. Deep breathing exercises: Breathe in through the nose for 6 seconds, hold breath for 4 seconds, and exhale quickly through the mouth. Repeat as many times as desired to center the mind and calm the heart rate during practice and immediately prior to performance.

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

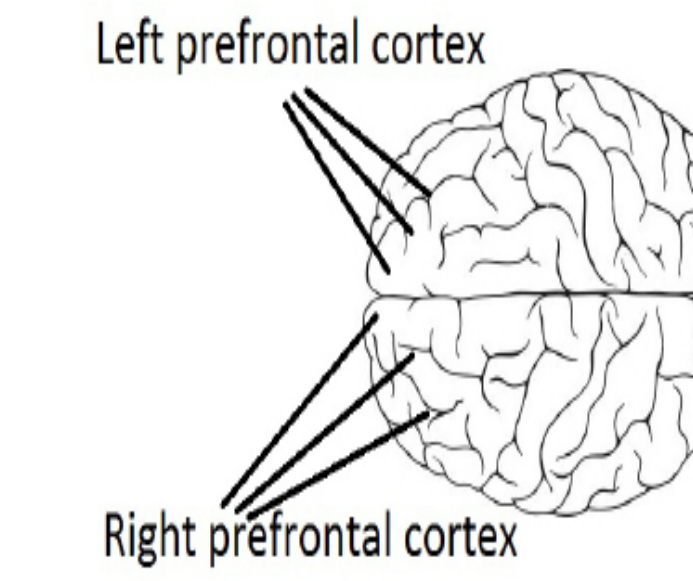
4. Short progressive relaxation sequence: Clench the muscles in one area of your body (face, bicep, quadriceps, or calf) as tight as you can for 7 seconds, then slowly release tension from this area. Rest for 10 seconds. Repeat the exercise 2-3 times on the same muscle group.

5. Visualization: During practice sessions, visualize a mental image of the performance space. Imagine the instrument and chairs, the lighting, the feeling of the heat of the lights on your skin, and the layout of the room. Visualize successfully performing the piece and hearing the phrasing, dynamics, and character you wish to convey in your performance. Create a mental image of what you anticipate the actual performance to feel like as closely as possible.

Brain 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 cortex and right and left frontal pole areas (the front most 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.



Facilitating Flow Experiences Among Musicians

Objective:

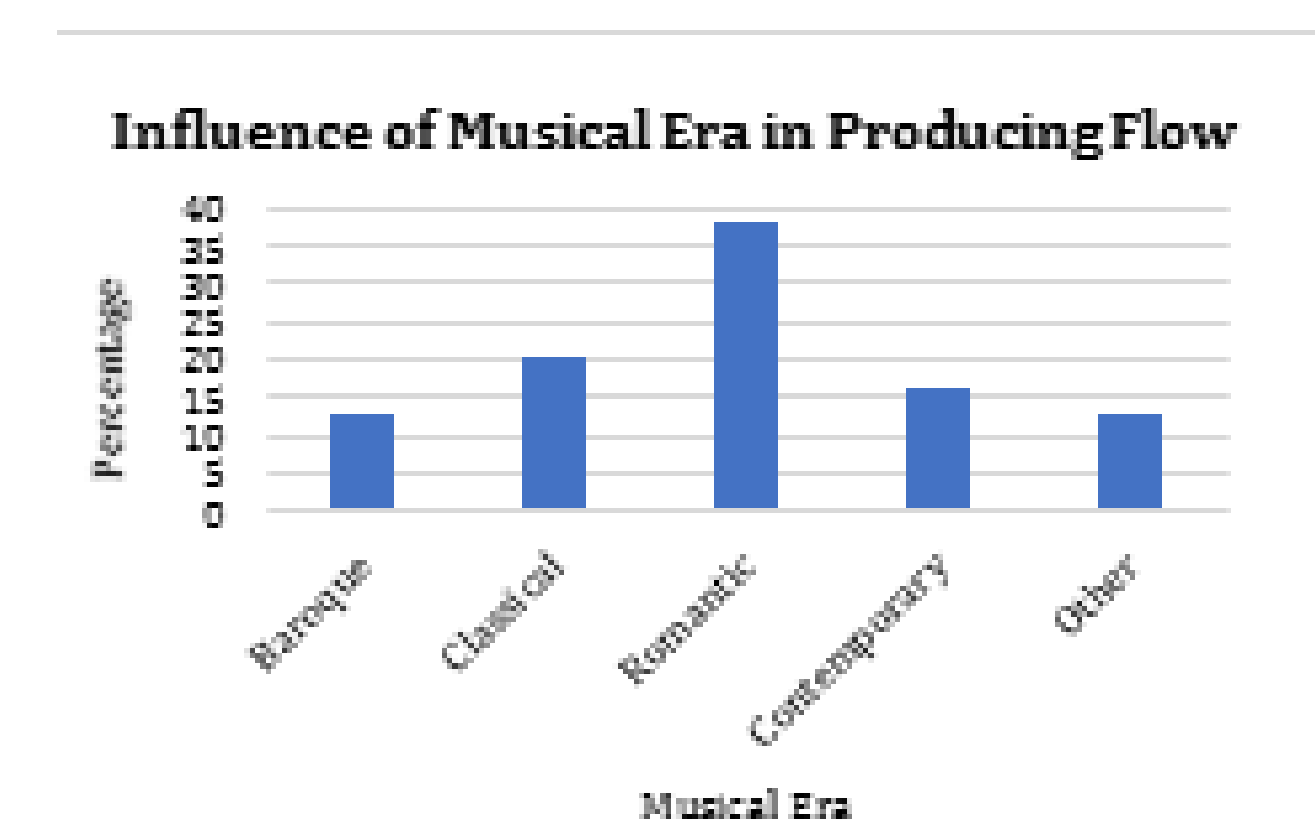
This study was conducted to determine whether different individual and demographic factors including age, musical ability, gender, goals, and self-confidence influence instrumentalist’s ability to achieve flow during performance.

Method:

- Participants consisted of 90 adult classical instrumental musicians who have been playing their instrument for an average of 36 years and consistently practice seven or more hours per week.
- Subjects completed a written mail-in survey containing numeric ratings and written-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 proneness 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 proneness. However, data hinted at positive feelings of self-confidence and self-trust while performing being related to the individual’s proficiency and 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 involvement (32 responses) 3. Sense of connection with others (26 responses) 4. Sense of effortlessness (20 responses) 5. Sense of transcendence (12 responses).
- 12% of participants reported flow experiences occurring during sight reading.
- 45% reported experiencing flow while playing in an ensemble.
- 62% of participants reported that their flow experiences occurred in non-performance situations.
- Romantic era music was responsible for 38% of flow experiences.
- Classical era music was responsible for 20% of flow experiences.
- Contemporary era music was responsible for 16% of flow experiences.
- Baroque era music was responsible for 13% of flow experiences.
- Other genres of music were also responsible for 13% of flow experiences.



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. However, most descriptions indicated a strong sense of goal setting, robust self-confidence, and heightened mindfulness in inducing flow experiences regardless of age and ability. Data revealed the effectiveness of different eras of music in producing flow, although further research pertaining to this is necessary to draw conclusions as this may indicate the influence of genre, such as romantic vs. classical era, rather than age and ability as factors in producing flow. Through this study, the principles of setting clear goals, awareness, creating an ability to intently listen and react to the music and being completely absorbed are shown to be the most prominent and effective in producing musical flow experiences in playing and performance.

Necessary Components in Achieving Flow in Practice and Performance

- One must be physically and mentally and 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.
- Awareness, commitment, and trust are the three most essential components in achieving flow.
 - o Awareness: Paying attention to what is occurring during performing, through sound (volume, rhythm, pitch), sight (looking at the notes, having physical awareness in the act of playing, and images implied by the music), feeling (acknowledging feelings experienced within oneself or in the music), and understanding (form, harmony, text, function, and meaning of the music).
 - o 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.
 - o 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:

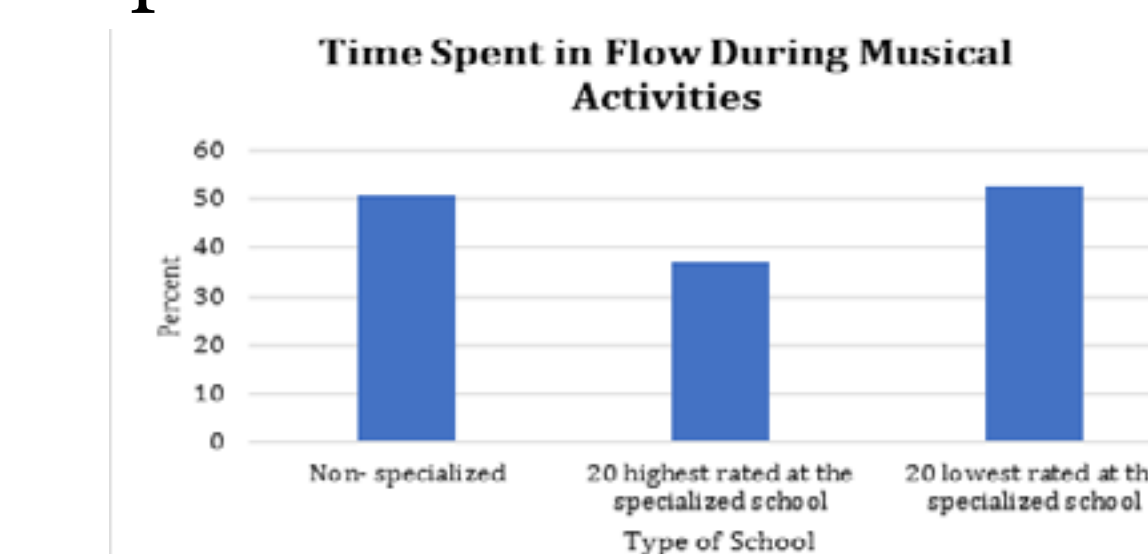
This study explores the relationship between flow theory and young musician’s development of performance skills. The main question of this study is: To what extent do flow experiences account for differences in the amount of time young musicians spend practicing and their levels of performance achievement?

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 20 highest rated students and 20 lowest rated students, based on their musical performance ability, participated in this study.
- 20 students from the non-specialized school were selected by the school’s head of music as the most musically active students.
- Each student participant carried an electronic pager and a booklet of self-report forms. Each time the pager signaled, (once, at random, within each 2-hour period between 8am and 10 pm for one week) students would complete a form, answering questions asking where they were, who they were with and what they were thinking about and what they were doing. Flow items were measured according to the levels of challenge and skill that were rated on a 10-point scale, 10 being the most challenging.

Results:

- 18 categories of activities were identified; “productive activities” (classwork, study, job, music related work/practicing), “leisure activities” (social, sport/games, tv, listening to music, art/hobbies (non-musical), reading, thinking, playing music for fun), and “maintenance activities” (eating, personal care, chores/errands, rest/napping, and travel)
- Results indicated that students from the non-specialist school and high achievers from the music school reported significantly more flow experiences than moderate achievers from the specialist school when engaged in playing music.



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 achieving students 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 in comparison to the more successful students in their school. The evaluative context of a specialized school may cause students to feel less musically 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.

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