

Preparing for performance

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Performing in public presents musicians with many challenges. It also rewards their experience, development and enjoyment of music. Without public performance our study and work lacks purpose and focus. We need the rigour and demands that public exposure brings to our work to really focus our thinking and to challenge ourselves to do our best.

While public performance is not easy and contains stress factors, we know that without stress we- and our skills are not going to grow. The task for us as performers is to develop an approach to our study and skill development that will maximise the benefits of the challenge of public performance for us.

As performers, we are familiar with some of the physical manifestations of nervousness or anxiety that accompany and sometimes impact strongly on our performance. We want to examine our attitude to these and find ways to embed the energies which they represent more effectively and creatively in our performance. Physical symptoms are never isolated and always have mental and even spiritual correlates. As musicians we know that our work is always aiming for a unification of body, mind and spirit. In performing music our body leads us to mind and spirit and our mind and spirit lead us to the body. The way we feel, act and perform in public is ultimately a reflection of our thinking and our work which is formed in the preparation to the performance. If we want to improve our abilities to benefit from the challenges of public performance, rather than regard these as undesirable obstacles to our work, we will need to look carefully at our preparation leading up to the performance in a comprehensive way. The following contains some simple practical advice which relates to physical, mental and spiritual preparation.

Long term

Long term strategies form our skills, our identity, persona and our ethos as a musician and performer. They develop our thinking, our practical, technical abilities, our physical responses and our general level of motivation, inspiration and enthusiasm. Often, we think that inspiration and motivation in particular come from others, from external circumstances or achievements. But as creative artists, we are responsible for the entirety of the performance, including our level of enthusiasm, motivation and autonomous inspiration. We cannot be dependent on external inspiration. Instead we must learn to determine the performance from within and through our spirit in all its aspects. Our motivation and inspiration needs to be maintained by us. In particular, the clearer we are about the purpose and values of being a musician, the better for all our work, including any particular interpretative or technical work.

Values and Motivation

A clear view of the purpose of musical performance can never be taken for granted. After all, our instrument resembles a toy and music itself is entirely ephemeral and transitory. It has an intentional and no objective presence. We, the composers, performers and listeners, create its meaning. What is the purpose of music for you, why do you perform music? This is an important question to which you should have a clear answer. It is a question you should contemplate for a few minutes every day. It may not have a straightforward answer and your answer may not be applicable to anyone else. But without an answer or with only a vague notion, your performance may lack

conviction and purpose and over time you may easily get lost in attitudes and approaches that will undermine your work. Closely related to the question of purpose and value is the issue of motivation. Do you enjoy playing, performing and practicing? Again, there may not be a straightforward answer to this, but you should be honest in asking this question and contemplating your detailed response. Maybe, sometimes you do enjoy performing or practice and at other times you do not. Inconsistent and shifting answers here are entirely fine - there is no expected, right or successful answer, no correct attitude towards your motivation. All you simply need to do and regularly so (daily) is reflect why you love music and why you play the violin, why you love doing what you do and what gives us the most joy in working with the violin, with music and with other musicians.

→ *Set aside a few minutes every day to reflect on your own feeling of purpose and motivation for playing the violin, performing and making music. You can write down a list of reasons why you enjoy what you do and what motivates you in a reflective journal or diary. Go over this list daily, add to it and make it rich and varied- make your thinking clearer and more differentiated. Be sure to follow your own feelings and thoughts in this. There is no need to think you must enjoy music and violin playing in any particular way. Discuss in your lessons what motivates and inspires you about your studies and towards musical performance*

Comparison and Competition

Music and musical performance are increasingly treated as objects in a cultural and educational marketplace. Our modern world is not content with transience. Individuals want to achieve permanence and immortality. But in music and life there is no permanence. A musical performance ends in silence and all we may have left at the end is a transformation of listeners and performers, which does not in itself last forever either. Since music and musical performance are treated more and more like objects, musical performers are often defined (and define themselves) through their “possessions”. Possessions can include anything from their instrument, to technical attributes (“...a great staccato...”), achievements (competition and prize winner) or teachers. In short: music and musical performance in the modern world are increasingly determined by fetishism where things or the conception of experiences, feelings and ideas as things replaces the authentic way of relating to music. The fetishisation of music is advanced by teachers, institutions, parents and students alike, because it makes music readily a trading item in the market place and allows us to put money values on aspects of music and art. It makes it literally easier to *deal* with music.

In itself, there is little we can do against this powerful tendency in our culture except to recognise it for what it is and to realise that many of the expressions of this culture can have a negative impact on our ability to perform. If we allow the thinking of a fetishized culture to take strong hold in our minds and our work we may be misleading ourselves and we build expectations, obstacles and conceptions which have nothing to do with a sincere or authentic relationship to music. If we treat performances as objects, manicure performances to become brand items and fetishize technical achievements, the interpretation of music, our ability to listen and relate to an audience genuinely will be fundamentally changed.

On a practical level, this cultural tendency shows itself strongly in making musical performance and musical performers into objects of competition. Increasingly, music and musical performance are changed by “competitiveness” which measures and summarizes a performance or a performer. However, a genuine artist and genuine artistic achievement and expression is always incomparable and unique. And it is precisely this uniqueness that a performance must achieve as a realisation of its

purpose. Measurement and summary of rank are thus only ever very incomplete reflections of artistic performance. Musical performers cannot allow them to limit their approach.

All external comparison and competitiveness in music and musical performance then are an appearance only and do not reflect the heart of the matter. They create distractions in the performer's mind and approach and streamline teachers' thinking taking us away from the authentic purpose of music and art. However, while we may agree with this general insight, we still can find it difficult to distance ourselves from a competitive culture and attitude and take ourselves and what we do uniquely serious. In a practical sense we need to be able to live with comparison and competitiveness and mediate our reactions and fears through careful thinking.

→ *Remember that music and your musical performance are entirely unique. You are seeking a unique and authentic expression and you want to express what you feel and hear in- and through the music when you perform. When listening to others and thinking about their performance, focus on what it is you can learn from what you hear and see. Identify one or two things and move back to your own work and its purpose. If you participate in competitions (and there are sensible, practical reasons why you might do this, even frequently) order your thinking well: you are there to make and perform music. Winning and success are not in your control. Winners are selected by others (judges) whose ignorance and limited view is always reflected in any judgment. And success as a musician is in any case a very long-term idea. This is important for all performances: if you prepare well you will present yourself well and some people will always recognise this and your unique and special qualities. You can grow this approach even if you never win a competition and may in fact end up being much more successful than someone else who does win. To be successful you must develop your thinking, attitude, character and skills rather than fill your trophy cabinet. Strive to make every performance special, beautiful and skilful through thoughtful preparation. When you listen to others try to recognise those characteristics and find inspiration for your work in the fact this can be achieved. Let go of disappointment by reminding yourself that music is transitory, subject to the judgments of others over which you have no control. You will play many, many more times in public and if you love music and believe in its power and commit sincerely to developing yourself and your skills with thought and discipline, you will be very successful.*

Perfectionism

Musicians and performers naturally want to play as well as possible. The very understanding of art and beauty include a commitment to perfection. However, when we think of perfection in different contexts we quickly realise that it is not a homogenous concept. Perfection as a limitless and unfocussed concept, extending to "everything" can become very debilitating to us- it becomes a kind of "terrorism of the soul" because we can never satisfy it. Human beings and human activity is never truly perfect. Yet, we also realise we want to continuously do better because we desire beauty and perfection. It is possible to experience perfection without having all things perfect. You can still have a perfect dinner party, even though one of the guests tipped wine over the table cloth. These things happen and they do not ruin the essential elements of the dinner party. They are simply natural occurrences which we cannot control, nor would we want to do so. If we wanted to avoid the possibility that no one spilt any wine, we would ruin the party with our anxiety and it would be anything but perfect.

This example illustrates that we need to organise our conception of perfection in such a way that we affirm what is important about a performance and maintain high expectations about these elements

but otherwise “let go” of our ever invasive judgment and learn to accept elements of human failure. In art perfection that is unnatural and enforced destroys itself - mere technical perfection is in any case limited in its appeal.

- ➔ *Think through which aspects of your performance preparation are strong. Work on passages where you do not feel comfortable. Test yourself by playing through a piece in performance conditions. Note the places which are not fluid or calm. These need to be practiced until they feel easy and until they sound as you want them to sound. You can accomplish this in mental practice (without instrument) which may even be more effective because you practice your anticipation and your ideas will be clearer. Only a performance that is easy and clear stands a chance of achieving perfection. Perfection requires clarity and ease.*
- ➔ *Learn to inhibit reaction to your own playing, particularly any reaction to mistakes. Mistakes are important because they teach us to improve. Yet, they are at the same time and in a different sense undesirable. Mistakes must not determine our playing, which they will if we practice in reaction to them. Mistakes provide us with information. Use them for this purpose but otherwise move on and attribute no value to them. Let them go and abandon them once you have revised and improved your playing. Focus on what you want to do.*
- ➔ *Remind yourself that complete perfection is not human. The desire to do our best while accepting that we cannot achieve perfection teaches us humility and develops our character. Perfectionism which insists on perfection at all cost is a form of arrogance. It generates anxiety. Instead, aim for perfection while accepting the presence of failure. Remain patient and compassionate to yourself.*

Practice and Time management

A performance is successful because the practice leading up to it was comprehensive and effective. When looking at performance preparation and possible ways to improve it we must always consider the way we practice and prepare. In lives which are increasingly busy and planned and where even young people are already overactive to conquer an all-too-demanding timetable, performance preparation can be rendered ineffective by chaotic time management and the anxiety, impatience and confusion of resulting pressures. Organisation of time is critical for music itself as it is for the preparation of it. A performance which is prepared with erratic use of time stands a far lesser chance to be well prepared than one in which a calm and focussed flow of work is achieved. In addition, the natural increase in energy that is characteristic of any performance will spin easily out of control if it is added to a base energy that is already determined by anxiety, chaos and panic through poor time management and practice habits.

In the first instance we must make adequate time for practice. In general and depending on circumstances we should practice two to four hours per day (every day). In cases where preparation time is limited, time management and organisation is especially critical. The organisation of time includes the need to set starting and end points of practice sessions, expectations about content of these session with a view to preparing a given task (eg. the performance of a certain piece at a certain time) in a given time frame to our own highest expectations. Learning how to deliver outcomes to ourselves is important for an artist and performer. Time management can improve significantly when keeping a practice diary and structuring and reviewing our practice time daily and in achievable units (box practice). Task or practice units should generally be around twenty to thirty minutes long to enable recovery of attention.

- ➔ *Set aside time every day for practice. Make this a priority. Turn off any media and deposit phones and tablets in a place outside your practice room if you find you are distracted by their presence.*
- ➔ *Organise practice time over a large cycle and keep a practice log or journal. This can be brief and schematic, but must be comprehensive and be kept consistently. Review it daily and balance your work. It is not essential that all work is covered every day, if that is not possible. However, over time a proper consistency and balance of work must be achieved. Use the practice journal to think about your general time management and identify opportunities to structure your timetable in the most effective way.*
- ➔ *If practice time does not meet your expectations work on a step-by-step approach to change this. Box practice and practice planning tools can be very helpful here.*

Effective practice

Time management and the quantity of practice aside, practice itself needs to be effective. Effectiveness of practice is a function of attention, organisation of the mind and clear thinking. There are many practice methods which can assist your learning immensely: the practice of co-ordination through slow-, stop- and accentuation practice, left and right hand separation and mental practice are essential. Most of our practice aims to build clear correlation between mind and hands. Central to our playing is the connection to the instrument and music through physical feeling and sensation. In musical performance we think with our senses.

However, no practice method itself will guarantee achievement and success. All practice must be accompanied by consistent attention and increasing demand for clarity of feeling and sound in anticipation. Effective practice relies on consistent promotion of physical relaxation and on finding the most natural and effortless ways of playing.

- ➔ *Note in your practice journal your main practice methods and return to them regularly in your work. Ensure that temporal organisation (anticipation), relaxation and feeling (physical sensation) are central to all attention in your practice. Remember that your tasks are only accomplished when your playing is natural and effortless throughout and reflects musical intent and freedom of imagination. Include mental practice (visualisation) in a strategic and substantive way in your practice. This includes complete mental rehearsals of a given performance.*
- ➔ *Set aside some performance time every day to test the clarity and resilience of your achievements. You can record a portion of your repertoire or technical work on which you worked and review it, setting priorities for your next practice session or day. Develop your understanding how you learn and what makes your work effective and successful.*

Short term (one week out from the performance)

Effective performance preparation includes several stages. Ongoing work and habit formation must give way to shorter term, specific focus on a particular performance when such a performance moves into sight. Performers need to learn the best way to progress their thinking and feeling to enter their performance zone in a timely and effective manner. The idea that performance is reliant on a specific state of mind or approach (“zone”) which is not achieved through construction, analysis or deliberate strategy but comes on its own accord to us and reveals itself to the performer has crucial consequences for our work. It suggests that performance preparation has indirect elements. We need to be concerned to eliminate interference so that natural performance instincts and powers of intuition can ultimately take over the direction of the performance.

The closer we move in time towards the performance the more likely we are to mobilise defensive interference patterns which unfortunately advance our tendencies for conscious control and interference with resulting distraction and anxiety. It is accordingly vital that we learn to reduce and sideline such interference and that we focus at the same time on the cues - both physical and mental that will allow us to perform at our best. In moving closer to the performance, we are more likely to feel energised by nerves and anxiety. Welcome the energy that nervousness brings (welcome your nerves) and look after the undesirable physical manifestations through some physical exercise and frequent relaxation exercises.

Confidence and organisation

In the short term, we must persist to maintain organisation of our work. It is common that the stress of a suggested performance undermines our commitments to disciplines of practices. We often abandon technical practice because we have to work on the piece that will be performed. However, this is unwise. Maintaining the foundations of your playing in the lead-up to a performance is crucial for clear, simple and concrete physical ideas and sensations enable your connection with the intuitive dimension of your performance in the first instance. We need to maintain the contact with our sensations, with those simple and foundational connections to our performance skills to enable the intuitive relationship with the music and to provide a pathway for our consciousness to enter the “zone” of performance. All these directions are facilitated by our sensations! Thus, organising your daily work with continued attention to the foundations of your playing remains vital.

- ➔ *A few days before any performance, continue to work on foundational technique (slow scales, arpeggios, etc daily and consistently) and work through the repertoire to be performed at slow (even very slow...) speeds, identifying deliberately relaxation, anticipation and clear mental processes and cues. Use the time to enforce attitudes of motivation towards musical performance in inclusive terms. What is the aim of performance in artistic, human terms? What is your vision of musical performance? Why do you think performance is important and what do you seek to reveal in it? Try to answer these questions in objective ways and try to move away from a purely subjective view point of what you yourself feel, to a view that can hold for people in general. Any performance, no matter how modest the audience numbers (friend, family, etc) can elevate you and your vision of performance to a height and intensity that can transcend any subjective experience thus far. It is this experience and transcendence that musical performance is ultimately seeking to achieve. So: seize this opportunity with clear and organised preparation and align your performance with a timeless endeavour of the artist in a sincere and consistent way.*
- ➔ *Increase the amount of mental and slow practice with frequent relaxation exercise between practice units. Build an affirmative response to your playing and continue to clarify what it is you want to achieve in the interpretation/ performance. Work on you motivation: Clarify and make a list why you are looking forward to the performance.*
- ➔ *Remain organised in the week leading up to the performance and eliminate any chaotic components of last minute or improvised changes to your schedule. Prioritise. Reduce noise and chatter (internet, social media, etc).*
- ➔ *Familiarise yourself with the condition of the performance. Do you know the hall? What it will feel like to play in it? Rehearse in the hall, if you can and start thinking through your pre-performance routine (see below).*
- ➔ *Mentally rehearse (visualise) the performance from the point where you walk on stage, take the bow, tune, etc until the applause at the end. Do this after you have worked through your*

relaxation exercises. If the performance is inconsistent in your mind, work on the areas that need improvement in your practice sessions and before you return to your mental rehearsal.

Immediately before and after performance

The time immediately before and after a performance is important. We need to develop productive routines to integrate our skills and preparation and focus our mind and body for the task of performance. Physical preparation is vital, ensuring adequate sleep, healthy eating and exercise on the day of performance especially. A few hours before a performance a vigorous 20 minute walk or run will metabolise excess adrenalin. Checking that the “technology” is in order (spare strings, music stand, etc) eliminates potential last minute catastrophes and resulting anxiety.

Debriefing and debriefing routines are important because they connect any performance to our ability to perform and develop. If we have mental habits that direct us towards frustration and disappointment, it is better to allow a bit of time for the post-performance debrief. In the end the useful elements of debriefing are about the aspects that made a performance successful and enjoyable for us. We need to identify these after every performance and add them to our mental resources.

- ➔ *Immediately before the performance revise your relaxation exercises and establish your performance “posture”-> confident, relaxed, open, engaged and inspired. This is how you will walk on stage.*
- ➔ *Focus your mind and gather the elements of your performance routine. Remind yourself of what works for you- it could be a feeling, a physical movement, an action, etc that triggers your mind to enter the zone of performance. Once you go for it let the performance happen! Music comes to you and “it” plays itself.*
- ➔ *Following the performance, enjoy the appreciation of the audience. There is no need for post-mortems. Enjoy the energy and the feeling of accomplishment. Recall what worked, what you enjoyed... a phrase, a feeling, the beauty of sound, etc. Gather all the evidence of success and remind yourself of these. If your first reaction is disappointment about the performance, accept this for now, but keep asking and probing which aspects worked. Eventually (and sometimes with the help of others) you will be calm enough to identify these. Other and more detailed elements of debriefing can be done in the practice room much later. If you recorded the performance, leave the critical listening for a few days, maybe during one of your practice sessions, when you are calmer. Listen with a critical and compassionate ear and note your improvement. Remind yourself that you will play many, many more performances and that this performance was one step in your long life with music.*