
On the study of violin playing

*Creativity and imagination
in performance and
practice*

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Introduction

This paper expands earlier thoughts about violin teaching and learning¹ in particular in tackling relevant pedagogical principles and in directing attention to creativity as a central force of a performer's work. Two areas in particular interest me here: The use and role of the imagination in practice and the importance of creativity to a violinist's practice and development. I will try to argue that attention to imagination and creativity must be the main focus for teachers and students alike, regardless of any particular level of skill and accomplishment. This is particularly important in a practical study such as violin playing where repetition, codified technical understanding and methodical pathways tend to undermine imagination and creativity with the possibility of closing down learning over time (known as "arrested development", Ericson, 365)².

I have observed over the years that creative capacity can become frustrated and diminishes quickly as musicians fulfil and adapt to functional demands. This can be the case when young performers are seeking to perfect technical outcomes at all costs or when experienced musicians discharge repetitive routine tasks without engagement. Performers of any age and level simply cannot take creativity for granted. Even if we think that creative thinking is an essential and obvious characteristic of a musician, the common separation of technical ability and musical intention involves a danger that thinking functionalises aspects of performance leading to reflexively reactive approaches. These ultimately close the artistic and human possibilities of the individual and amplify frustration and even despair. A musician who becomes predominantly reflexive may still be functional in some respects. In some cases such a musician can achieve streamlined performances, boast facile instrumental skills and even project musical outcomes. However, if her capacity is pre-dominantly reflexive her ability to listen and make music with others falls often far behind her functional, technical skills. In addition the musical projection tends to be unengaged, insincere or inauthentic. A playing which is conditioned by reflexive reaction shows high levels of automatic, repetitive characteristics and can contain physical and mental indicators of disengagement or frustration which increase over time.

Reactive and creative thinking

Clarifying my approach, I would like to differentiate two modes of thought and behaviour: I refer to thinking and doing as reflexively reactive when these are substantially defined through an automatic or predictable response to a perceived stimulus, problem or task. I understand creativity to refer to a capacity of imagining such a stimulus, problem or task and of intuiting a defining context of such a stimulus, problem or task. This intuition and imagination transforms the original perception of the stimulus, problem or task immediately through active and creative consciousness. It should be clear that I distinguish reaction from response here. A response can be creative. It is so when it actively re-invents the stimulus and its context through active imagination. Naturally this is not a comprehensive conception of creativity. But it is one that is useful when looking at the activity of musical performance. On my terms a reaction is a largely passive response which remains reflexive to a given stimulus. I will try to argue that such a response is ultimately artistically, technically and developmentally infertile. Ironically, it is also quite common in instances where performers are "working hard to solve their problems".

Imagination and Analysis

In this abstract understanding creativity is largely directed by the activity of the imagination and intuition. It is an activity which always involves consciousness and relies on sustained and active, conscious attention. Although it is clear that discursive reason can play a role such activity is never

¹ Summarized in G. Richter (2012), *On the study of violin playing- a guide to learning practice and performance*.

² Ericsson, K. A., Krampe, R. T. & Tesch-Roemer, C. "The role of deliberate practice in the acquisition of expert performance". *Psychological Review*, 100, 363-406.

limited to being merely rational, calculative or analytic. Analysis in fact is not characteristic of the essence of creativity. Reactivity on the other hand is directed towards concrete outcomes and achievements in the everyday world. It is reliant on reasoned response and often includes a determination through perceived pragmatic demands.

The two modes of approaching the given and distinguishing reactive from creative thinking are analysis and interpretation. Analysis as it is commonly understood is reactive to a given context or problem. Interpretation on the other hand is creative as it makes sense of the given and thus reaches beyond the given. It considers and defines while proceeding from an intuition of meaning towards an explication. It is peculiar that this conception of interpretation suggests a unified view of human consciousness: an intuition of meaning is confirmed by its articulation. While this process may rely on intermediate, dialectic steps the ontological unity that is implied is nevertheless remarkable. It suggests a unified Parmenidean or Platonic conception where consciousness is both the source and the recipient of truth. Another way of looking at this would be to say that consistently creative thinking develops (and makes use of) a differentiated understanding of ontology, in particular in relation to temporality. Reactivity on the other hand reduces being and time to a common and every-day understanding (clear divisions of space and time, past, present and future) and fragments an essentially unified reality into disparate dimensions of temporality and place.

While I distinguish these two modes of thought and practice here as a starting point I would like to make clear from the outset that for a performing musician their effective harmonisation is crucial for their own work and ongoing development. The initial separation merely points out that the ability of listening and making music as practiced by the performer, is substantially creative in nature and that a musician maintains and develops her creative imagination at all times even where she seemingly reacts to technical challenges. While technical complexity and demands for perfection seem to suggest a greater need to train reaction and functionalise performance, I will argue here that this is in fact highly undesirable and question whether such focus is ever really pre-dominantly required. Well developed, creative thinking in action (as distinguished from analytical reaction) is not only richer in possibility, it also leads to more accomplished, flexible, sustainable and useful technical, musical and intellectual skills. In addition it is possible to establish it at every level of ability with rigour, reliability and precision. It is also applicable to situations which seem predominantly responsive (ie. orchestras). Even where a performer is largely given a role of responding to directions, the musician always creates the response through an active interpretation and imagination - she does not simply deliver it through a set of pre-determined technical tools. Thus, even contexts which are perceived as oppressive and demand seemingly reactive responses must be transformed into contexts where a creative consciousness accomplishes its work.

The centrality of anticipation for playing and performance

Musical performance essentially establishes a process of temporal unfolding through the intentionality of the performer. The intentionality is here the more fundamental reality determining ideally all aspects of a performance, most fundamentally its temporality. Considering interpretative and artistic intentionality is accordingly crucial to understanding and improving the performance of music. The important point here is simple: the musical performer anticipates the performance. If the performance is to reflect the depth of imagination of a performer, all aspects of the performance including the technical ones need to be anticipated. This does not mean that such aspects are pre-constructed. It simply means that they are imagined in their full detail before they happen and that the imagination (not a reaction or reflex) takes responsibility for the reality of the performance and all its aspects. It also indicates that improvements to performance must always be sought on the level of activity preceding the performance.

The performer or player then finds herself within a creative mode of thinking and doing at all times. To be authentic, she keeps mere or reflexive reaction to an irrelevant minimum during a musical

performance. This mode of thinking needs to be developed in practice, of course. It is an attitude easily undone by frustration or lack of attention to the temporal relationship between acoustic and kinaesthetic imagination and the actual sounding performance itself. If for example the performer perceives challenges to her technical fluidity, a natural and common response may be to react to any problems and attempt to fix these. At this point, such a response cannot succeed if this would have to disrupt or even stop the performance. Performers instead need to learn to think in action. Thinking in action, however, implies that we maintain a significant attention on future possibilities while dealing with the present. It seems to also imply that we contain reflexive reactions and in particular frustration. The notion of a successful performance suggests that we anticipate more strongly what needs to be the case while developing an active capacity to dim the importance of realities that may in fact be the case.

Technique vs. *Techné*³: the role of imagination in practice and technical development

I have suggested so far that a performer's consciousness is based on a capacity for anticipation and a simultaneous ability to suspend automatic responses to the many perceptions of reality. This dual capacity is accomplished by our imagination. Ordinary conceptions of technique place our task within a constructive paradigm: the imagination provides a blueprint or idea for a performance and the technical mechanisms serve to realise this blueprint. However in the conception I am advancing, technical ability is no longer divested from musical intentionality. The imagination of the musical form is the technical feeling, image and intuition. Musical performance is the reflection of embodied imagination. Any artistic idea makes little sense to a performer unless it is imagined in the terms of her instrumental reality. And further: the reality of playing is the imagined reality not only by virtue of the imagination but also by virtue of the performer's command over her perceptions!

What we end up with, then, is a monism, an identity of means and ends in musical performance. We are no longer considering a technique which serves music, is developed independently of music or has any mediated relationship to- or subsequent presence within music. We are looking at a *techné*, an art and ability to play music which has embodied and imaginative aspects, where rhythmic energies and somatic realities unite and where the musical intuition encounters the clear idea of somatic presence and embodied reality.

Methods to advance creative thinking and anticipation

The practical challenge to such a view of musical performance is in fact found in a paradoxical reality: the performer's sensitivity to musical outcomes impacts on her capacity for anticipation and undermines her capacity for musical performance. The teacher hears objectionable outcomes and directs the student's attention to this reality, in fact advancing reality over anticipation and demanding a response- often a reflexive one. In both cases responses address perceived problems or outcomes when we should focus on the importance of anticipation to performance. In other words: the more musically sensitive and perceptive the performer or teacher, the more potentially prone she is to disrupt the performance and undermine the playing through reaction to the shortcomings of the performance. It is for this reason that we may see more technical problems in the perceptive student than in the naive and that at times didactic responses lead to merely artificial and entirely unnatural solutions. Accordingly, as teachers we must beware of judgements about performance and talent that are extrapolations of- or reactions to mere outcomes and perceptions.

An answer to this paradox is to affirm the predominance of the imagination, of course. A performer must direct her intentionality towards the future. Perceived shortcomings in the presence must be answered with reference to imagined, ideal and intentional realities! It is not productive to engage in a program of lengthy analysis to direct our focus essentially back towards the concrete problem. Instead, the performer's imagination looks towards the way a performance must be anticipated as the response to

³ The classical Greek term "*Techné*" refers to art rather than the technical aspects of artistic making.

any perception of shortcoming. Philosophically interested readers will see that this is a view towards a Parmenidean truth⁴ and it is a view that yields concrete and immediate practical results.

There is a methodological outcome then contained in these considerations: Mere repetition is not a valid method of practice. The performer must seek to imagine her performance or task in all its details with utmost clarity. If she faces shortcomings and challenges, the performer's response must be to clarify her intentionality – not merely reflexively repeat or manipulate her actions in practice. In addition, it is clear that intentions informed by frustration or impatient, vague conceptions are mostly unproductive and must be inhibited. Since the mode of attention- and intention determines essentially the outcome of a musical performance, practice must be directed towards them and seeks their improvement. This has concrete implications for any method of practice: Rather than focus on external, physical outcomes teachers must focus on ideas – ideas of musical shape, progression, form, intensity, dynamic, etc and also very importantly ideas of technical movement, energy and timing, centeredness, direction and rhythm, etc. Focussing on ideas and intention promotes metaphorical imagination and the unity of artistic conception which is essential for the successful anticipation of musical performance. Developing the imagination for ideas also develops our ongoing capacity to conceive such. The imagination is developed through its use and through our active engagement with it. This provides a final and important argument for the mediation, inhibition and even suppression of a critical, merely analytic or reactive response to musical performance.

The body-mind dualism in violin teaching

Much thought and work in violin pedagogy is directed towards affirming a control of the mind upon the body with the intention of securing the execution. I am arguing indirectly that such an approach is flawed. It implies two presuppositions which remain, however, questionable: firstly, music is a temporal form and as such its unfolding is essentially “indeterminate”. Music cannot be rendered into a musical object in any predictable or secure performance without denying this most authentic characteristic. Secondly, a radical Cartesian division of mind (*res cogitans*) and body (*res extensa*) makes little sense in music. Conceptions of musical form are always embodied. Musical phenomena such as sound and rhythm are essentially heard and felt phenomena. It seems absurd to imagine these abstracted from an embodiment only to assert its influence – such disconnection of music from embodiment would lead to purely mathematical entities of a Pythagorean kind⁵. For a performer abstract musical forms or proportionalities hold little meaning. To imagine music, is to imagine an embodied feel of sound. Accordingly, the individual's conception of sound and feel of sound will inform her imagination immediately and leaves no room for a controlling agency.

In cases where we corner our imagination and are unable to hear and feel a certain musical identity or context, we fall victim to the limitations of our perceptions. These perceptions inform our imagination and vice versa. Another way of articulating this would be to say that we can perceive what we can imagine and we can imagine what we can perceive. Since this is so, however, any division between mind and body, sensory imagination and perception and purely imagined perception and sensation starts to dissolve. Our body with its physical characteristics becomes an extension of the mind and it is not conceivable that one can control the other but rather that their dialogue and harmony is seminal to the life of a unified artistic consciousness itself.

⁴ “Come now, I will tell thee - and do thou hearken to my saying and carry it away - the only two ways of search that can be thought of. The first, namely, that It is, and that it is impossible for anything not to be, is the way of conviction, for truth is its companion. The other, namely, that It is not, and that something must needs not be, - that, I tell thee, is a wholly untrustworthy path. For you cannot know what is not - that is impossible - nor utter it; For it is the same thing that can be thought and that can be.” (Parmenides, transl. Burnett 1892)

⁵ Augustine and Boethius discuss music on these terms as mere “form” or “number”.

The balance of imagination, skill and perception in playing music

From the above it follows that the clarity of our imagination determines the nature of our playing. While the desire for security is understandable, it is fundamentally misplaced. Clarity together with the required physical freedom in fact determines the performance. To the extent that the imagination is at all times clear, the performance can be “secure”. At the same time, musical performance is not entirely subject to the imagination alone. It unfolds within a dialogue between imagination and perception. While this dialogue is properly and largely lead by our imagination as it directs the intentionality of our active consciousness and leads the performer to anticipate the performance, perception takes on a subordinate and peripheral role. It confirms what the imagination conceives and it provides it with cues towards its orientation. The musical performer cannot direct a performance through a quest for merely objective perception in performance. This would immobilise the creative anticipation of the performance and undermine the very essence of the performative consciousness. Instead, the perceptual cues are selected and recognised as guides to the creative imagination and actively direct any possible anticipation. The quality of this process determines any “objectivity” - an artificial and inauthentic concept for performance which remains incomplete until silenced and directs what is yet to occur.

It seems to me that the partial or detailed peripheral instructions to any technical-physical process will be detrimental to performance no matter how well-intentioned and grounded in analysis they may be. Technical skills, in the case of violinists those supposedly complex movements, cannot be honed automatically in order to be used by a musical consciousness. This would put the performer at odds with her own intentions. To be sure, a performer who has a strong musical intention but lacks the technical translation of its articulation often exhibits strong characteristics of frustration. However, we do not overcome this by drilling automatic movements which are then used by musical playing. We rather seek to develop a unity of *techné* and consciousness in which musical imagination and physical execution are also unified. We can (and should) clarify partial aspects of our imagination – the merely musical as well as the predominantly physical (the traditional realm of technique) to enhance our repertoire of scenarios and ideas and to expand our possibilities and our imagination (elsewhere I have referred to these as “technical topics” following Wronski).

One such fundamental idea is that performance skills (technical skills) are dependent on grounded physical balance (free periphery and centred movement). Movement is optimised if it is centred, ie. if its active energy is as much as possible relayed to- and activated from the centre of the body. Reflexive reaction, stress and frustration upset this balance. The principle tasks in performance and practice then is to seek to establish and maintain this centring from which we derive all natural movement.

Principles of Practice (Teaching & Learning)

It is important to summarize some principles of teaching and practice which seem to emerge from this conception of performance, the role of imagination and perception and the centrality of anticipation in performance:

1. Performers must not react to their playing, in particular they must not react to mistakes and instead focus on maintaining grounded balance and centring as the physical source of anticipation. Refusal to react is not identical to a lack of perception or an inability to improve. In fact, refusal to react points to the quickest path towards elimination of mistakes and improvement by allowing the imagination to anticipate and determine reality.
2. Repetition in practice must always be transformative: ie. imagination consistently anticipates any playing. Good practice builds steps or cycles of transformative practice. Mere repetition as a result of frustration or with the view of securing an outcome undermines performance and arrests development.
3. Clarity of attention is central to practice: Attention is divided between perception and intentionality/ imagination. As the role of the imagination and intentionality are central

attention to perceptions remains peripheral. Mistakes lead towards clarification (ie. imagination of intention and transformative repetition) – not to correction or reaction. Attention drives the cycles of transformative repetition.

4. Physical balance (energy distribution between centre and periphery of the body) is central to fluid performance. Improvement to movements is achieved through improving balance (as distinguished from the manipulation of active movement itself); Imagination (not physical training) achieves both perception (analysis) of movement and its improvement. (re-calibrating movement through improved idea of movement/ balance (Dounis))
5. Teachers assist students to constitute performance. This means: all didactic activity is directed to reducing frustration, eliminating mere repetition, directing attention towards intention and imagination and enhancing capacity for anticipation. Most importantly teaching seeks to develop the use of the imagination, ie. the essence of any capacity to learn how to learn.

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