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# Mindfulness meditation: creative musical performance through awareness

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MINDFULNESS MEDITATION: CREATIVE MUSICAL PERFORMANCE THROUGH  
AWARENESS

A Monograph

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Musical Arts

in

The School of Music

by

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To Philip Teachey and Edward Fraedrich—  
guides along the way

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## ABSTRACT

Musicians spend countless hours practicing their instruments over the course of a lifetime. These hours are primarily spent learning how to manipulate the instrument through scale studies, etudes, and repertoire. However, despite intense and diligent effort, many musicians find themselves unable to perform for an audience without some kind of interruption in creativity in the form of mental and/or physical distractions. The symptoms of such distractions can include heart palpitations, muscle tension, shaking, feelings of fear and panic, and an inability to focus on the task at hand. The presence of these symptoms, typically referred to as “performance anxiety,” is, to some extent, common among performers of all ability levels.

The literature on performance anxiety is extensive, and suggests a wide range of coping strategies. Although many of these techniques are effective to some degree, they do not typically address the problem of how to cope with anxiety *during* the performance, which is the key to being creative and free of distractions in the performance. I think the practice of mindfulness meditation can be effective in coping with performance anxiety, both on and off stage.

In its simplest form, mindfulness meditation can be practiced in everyday activities, such as walking or washing the dishes. Thich Nhat Hanh, a well-known Buddhist monk and author of several books on meditation, describes the practice of mindfulness as being aware of what one is doing while one is doing it. By being more aware in all aspects of our lives, we can better deal with both the physical and mental distractions that occur onstage. Though musicians recognize performance anxiety as something that happens during performance, the anxiety (and how one deals with it) is not limited to just the performance, but is linked to everything else in one’s life. The practice of mindfulness may be one way of learning to feel and accept what is happening in the present moment, and ultimately we may be able to apply that attitude to performance.

## INTRODUCTION

Horowitz—finicky as a cat, enigmatic, and neurotic—was always waiting for the exact moment to do anything, especially play in public. He told me, ‘The tragedy for a performer is to have to be at your best at a certain day and time. What a horrible fate! Your best might have been two days before or after.’ And so Horowitz could be inert for years. Finding even the right hour of the day to practice the piano could be a monumental problem.<sup>1</sup>

David Dubal, *Evenings With Horowitz*

Musicians spend countless hours practicing their instruments over the course of a lifetime. These hours are primarily spent learning how to manipulate the instrument through scale studies, etudes, and repertoire. However, despite intense and diligent effort, many musicians find themselves unable to perform for an audience without some kind of interruption in creativity in the form of mental and/or physical distractions. The symptoms of such distractions can include heart palpitations, muscle tension, shaking, feelings of fear and panic, and an inability to focus on the task at hand.<sup>2</sup> The presence of these symptoms, typically referred to as “performance anxiety,” is, to some extent, common among performers of all ability levels.<sup>3</sup> The degrees of the symptoms of performance anxiety can be placed in two categories: “facilitative” and “debilitative.” “Facilitative” performance anxiety is the feeling of arousal or “nerves” one gets before and/or during the performance; “debilitative” performance anxiety refers to the physical and mental states that leave the performer feeling helpless and detached from creativity during a performance.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Dubal, *Evenings with Horowitz: A Personal Portrait* (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing Group, 1994), 160.

<sup>2</sup> Rod Farnbach and Eversley Farnbach, *Overcoming Performance Anxiety* (Sydney, Australia: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 18-19.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony E. Kemp, *The Musical Temperament: Psychology and Personality of Musicians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 96.



The literature on performance anxiety is extensive, and suggests a wide range of coping strategies. Some of the more widely known and accepted coping strategies include psychological practices such as “cognitive restructuring” and “Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy,” relaxation and stress reduction techniques such as self-hypnosis and isometric muscle tensioning,<sup>5</sup> and medications such as “beta blockers” and anti-depressants.<sup>6</sup>

Although many of these techniques are effective to some degree, they do not typically address the problem of how to cope with anxiety *during* the performance, which is the key to being creative and free of distractions in the performance. And, oddly enough, the idea of “being in the moment” is one that is commonly agreed on by proponents of all of these strategies as being one of the important aspects of a successful performance. In this monograph, I would like to discuss the use of mindfulness meditation as a means of coping with the symptoms of musical performance anxiety, both “facilitative” and “debilitative.” Consequently, I will also investigate the use of mindfulness meditation as a way of gaining an overall awareness of one’s mental and physical distractions—an awareness that is important for creation during the moment of performance.

Briefly, mindfulness meditation is part of the Buddhist tradition of the “vipassana” style of meditation. Vipassana, a word in the Pali language that means “insight,” is typically taught in Buddhist sects in South and Southeast Asia.<sup>7</sup> Through the practice of vipassana meditation, one can reach enlightenment by gaining an “...ever-increasing awareness into the inner workings of

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<sup>5</sup> Stuart Edward Dunkel, *The Audition Process: Anxiety Management and Coping Strategies* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1989), 124.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 120-122.

<sup>7</sup> Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English*, Updated and Expanded Edition (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2002), 2.

reality itself.”<sup>8</sup> Mindfulness is this awareness, the “...habit of simply noticing sensory perceptions, [and] not allowing them to stimulate the mind into thought chains of reaction.”<sup>9</sup>

What is unique about mindfulness meditation is that it can be practiced in an entirely secular way, separate from its Buddhist ties. One of the leading American proponents of mindfulness meditation and its secular applications is Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, author and founder of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. At the clinic, Kabat-Zinn guides patients in mindfulness meditation as a means of bringing about physical and emotional healing through the practice of noticing one’s experiences. Kabat-Zinn writes in his book, *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, “Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally. This kind of attention nurtures greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance of present-moment reality.”<sup>10</sup> He continues,

A diminished awareness of the present moment inevitably creates other problems for us as well through our unconscious and automatic actions and behaviors, often by deepseated fears and insecurities. These problems tend to build over time if they are not attended to and can eventually leave us feeling stuck and out of touch. Over time, we may lose confidence in our ability to redirect our energies in ways that would lead to greater satisfaction and happiness....<sup>11</sup>

In its simplest form, mindfulness can be practiced in everyday activities, such as walking or washing the dishes. Thich Nhat Hanh, a well-known Buddhist monk and author of several books on meditation, describes the practice of mindfulness as being aware of what one is doing while one is doing it. For example, washing the dishes mindfully would involve being aware of how the soap feels on one’s hands, how the water sounds as it is running, etc. Conversely, when one is not washing the dishes mindfully, other thoughts flood the mind and one is completely unaware of the actual experience of the task at hand. In our day-to-day activities, we tend to

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Goleman, *The Varieties of the Meditative Experience* (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1977), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), 4.

think about the future or the past instead of the present. Guilt about the past and/or worries about the future are what cause undue anxiety.<sup>12</sup>

The same holds true in music, where performance anxiety is created by the mind's tendency to latch on to the emotions, thoughts, and physical sensations that accompany the performance, rather than the performance itself.<sup>13</sup> These thought processes cause anxiety that results in not only mental distractions, but physical tension as well. As the performer becomes more anxious, s/he becomes more tense, and that tension then leads to more anxiety, until finally the performer is unable to focus properly on the music at all. The links between anxious thoughts, negative emotions, and muscle tension are important, and are being studied by neuroscientists today. In fact, neuroscientist Richard Davidson (among others) has found compelling evidence proving that people who have practiced meditation throughout their lifetime are quite effective in controlling both their emotions and physical reactions to stressful and upsetting situations.<sup>14</sup> These studies have fascinating implications for coping with anxiety in all fields, including music. Practicing mindfulness in our daily activities is the first step toward an awareness of physical sensations and mental activities that can lead to anxiety.

I think the practice of mindfulness meditation can be effective in coping with performance anxiety on several levels. Being more aware of ourselves in all aspects of our lives, we can better deal with both the physical and mental distractions that occur on stage. Though musicians recognize performance anxiety as something that happens during performance, the anxiety (and how one deals with it) is not limited to just the performance, but is linked to

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>12</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, Revised Edition, Translated by Mobi Ho (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1975), 3.

<sup>13</sup> Paul G. Salmon and Robert G. Meyer, *Notes From the Green Room: Coping with Stress and Anxiety in Musical Performance* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1992), 69.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Destructive Emotions, How Can We Overcome Them? A Scientific Dialogue with the Dalai Lama* (New York: Bantam Books, 2003), 11.

everything else in one's life. Although performance anxiety may be normal (some even say necessary) our methods of accepting it and working with it are not always successful. The practice of mindfulness may be one way of learning to feel and accept what is happening in the present moment, and ultimately we may be able to apply that attitude to performance.

In this monograph, I will discuss performance anxiety as it pertains to music. However, in so doing, I will draw on examples from various other performance-related fields, including sports psychology, stand-up comedy, and other arts.

I will begin the paper by describing anxiety in general and how it relates to performance. Included in this discussion will be a section dealing with the idea that anxiety is a "necessary" component of performance. I will give some psychological and philosophical arguments for this claim and then apply these arguments to examples in musical performance.

In the next section, I will discuss the effect anxiety—both facilitative and debilitating—has on performance. I will make the point that performers in all fields are "successful" to the degree that they are able to work with the anxiety as they experience it, and that completely eliminating anxiety is not the goal. As part of this discussion, I will stress that one's emotions and physical symptoms are linked in such a way that anxiety is best dealt with when one is both physically relaxed and mentally focused. I will then introduce mindfulness meditation as a coping strategy for performance anxiety.

In the third section of the paper, I will discuss mindfulness meditation, giving a brief history of this form of meditation in both its Buddhist and secular aspects. I will also provide examples from recent neuroscientific research that suggests mindfulness practice is effective in promoting positive emotions and a more focused mind. This discussion will also include a discussion of how mindfulness practice can aid in dealing with anxiety.

In the last section of the paper, I will suggest that mindfulness practice in everyday life can have an impact on both normal and abnormal performance anxiety. I will show a connection between mindfulness practice and one's ability to cope with stress on and offstage. I will also explore the ways mindfulness might help one be more creative in the moment of performance. Finally, I will suggest the need to address performance anxiety at all levels of a musician's training, and include some thoughts on how mindfulness might fit into teaching.

Anxiety can be a difficult feeling to manage for performers of all ability levels. Unfortunately, students are seldom taught effective coping mechanisms for dealing with performance anxiety. In fact, the issue is often not even mentioned unless a student has a debilitating form of anxiety, at which point putting the coping strategies into practice becomes more difficult. This project is an important one to me as both a teacher and a performer, because I feel learning how to be creative in the moment of performance is as important ultimately as learning how to play the instrument itself. Many studies are being done on performance anxiety in all fields as more and more people realize the need for effective coping strategies. It is my hope that the daily practice of mindfulness meditation can be an effective way of learning to accept anxiety and bring about creative musical performance through emotional and physical awareness.

## CHAPTER 1. ANXIETY AND PERFORMANCE

The word ‘anxiety’ comes from the Latin word *anxius*, which means a condition of agitation and distress. With anxiety, this agitation and distress is felt deeply—in the mind and body—in the present moment. The fearful feeling is...internal and seems to be in response to something threatening but hazy, something vague or far away. You cannot identify the danger but feel the fear anyway.<sup>15</sup>

Jeffrey Brantley, *Calming Your Anxious Mind*

### **Fight-or-Flight**

When people feel threatened, either by some physical or social impetus, the body responds automatically in an attempt to prepare for the conflict. This occurrence is typically referred to as the “fight-or-flight” mechanism, and is innate in all animals. During this response, the heart rate quickens, the blood vessels near the skin’s surface contract, the blood pressure rises, the pupils dilate, the mouth feels dry, and often there is a strong need to empty the bowels. These are but a few of the body’s automatic reactions, and in more primitive times, they served to prepare humans for either a physical struggle or a quick get-away from an oncoming attack. In modern society, humans are not as likely to encounter such threats to their person. Instead, social pressures and psychological factors are the primary cause for anxiety. Regardless of the threat’s source, be it physical or psychological, one’s means for coping with the impending danger are the same.<sup>16</sup>

### **Fear versus Anxiety**

The basic difference between fear and anxiety is the threat that causes the “fight-or-flight” response. Fear is usually identified with a specific object. For example, if someone

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<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey Brantley, *Calming Your Anxious Mind: How Mindfulness and Compassion Can Free You From Anxiety, Fear, and Panic* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 2003), 15.

<sup>16</sup> Rollo May, *The Meaning of Anxiety*, Revised Edition (US: The Ronald Press Co., 1950/1977; New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1996), 69-70.

encounters a bear and feels afraid, then the feelings are of fear. The person is afraid of the bear and responds accordingly.<sup>17</sup>

In anxiety, the “fear response” is still triggered, but the cause of the feelings is unclear. If someone were walking in the woods and began feeling fearful when no apparent cause for concern existed, those feelings would be considered anxiety. In that situation, with no bear or other threatening force, the reason for the fear is not obvious.<sup>18</sup>

A second type of anxiety is more specific, and can be related to a particular object or situation. Unlike fear, however, the anxiety felt is completely exaggerated compared to the danger. This category of anxiety includes phobias, panic attacks, and extreme cases of performance anxiety.<sup>19</sup>

Other types of anxiety are worry and panic. Jeffrey Brantley, director of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program at Duke University, describes worry as “...the mind’s expression of anxiety.”<sup>20</sup> Worrying can be also be described as the state the mind is in when it gets “hung-up” on small details and refuses to let go of them. Worrying is a common problem in today’s goal oriented society, particularly since the main characteristic of worrying is a focus on what might happen in the future. For example, if someone is consumed with thoughts about an important meeting the next day—all of the things that need to be done and/or said to prepare for the meeting—s/he might lie awake all night thinking about what might happen, what could go wrong, etc. Rather than feeling rested and alert from a good night’s sleep, the person is

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<sup>17</sup> Brantley, 15-16.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Salmon and Meyer, 124.

<sup>20</sup> Brantley, 16.

anxious and tired during the meeting. Indeed, worrying rarely results in anything productive. Instead, it takes one's focus out of the present moment.<sup>21</sup>

An extreme form of anxiety is panic, which is a type of anxiety that is accompanied by such strong feelings of danger that the person feels like s/he might actually die.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, one of the hallmarks of anxiety in general is the feeling of being helpless or out of control in regard to the fear.<sup>23</sup>

### **Perceived Threat**

As we have seen, the threat that provokes anxiety can be in the form of physical and/or psychological danger. However, one of the most important factors in determining the degree of anxiety is how the threat is perceived and interpreted. Author Rollo May writes, "...a relatively harmless situation, objectively speaking, may become the occasion for great anxiety because of the complex ways, involving past experiences, in which the individual interprets his situation."<sup>24</sup> In his book, *The Meaning of Anxiety*, May gives an example of a case study which included a man that experienced high levels of anxiety during a bridge game when any minor disagreement arose. According to May, the man experienced undue anxiety in these situations because it "...set off associations connected with his early competition with his sisters which had been a great threat to his close dependency on his mother."<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, what can complicate the problem of anxiety is the fact that one's connections to past experiences and one's interpretation of such threats is not usually a conscious

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> May, *The Meaning of Anxiety*, 71.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



process.<sup>26</sup> As we will see in the discussion on performance anxiety to follow, this is an important point to consider.

### **Performance Anxiety**

The term “performance anxiety” has been defined in many ways and is used in reference to various activities, from public speaking to sports to playing a musical instrument. In an article entitled, “Performance Anxiety,” writers Glenn Wilson and David Roland define the term thusly: “Performance anxiety, sometimes called stage fright, is an exaggerated, often incapacitating, fear of performing in public.”<sup>27</sup> This definition, though succinct, is a very limited and narrow view of performance anxiety, particularly the anxiety experienced in a musical setting.

Andrew Steptoe, in his article, “Negative Emotions in Music Making: the Problem of Performance Anxiety,” provides a better and more thorough definition of performance anxiety which includes a concept of anxiety as a set of feelings whose occurrence is not just limited to the stage. Steptoe writes,

...musical performance anxiety occurs in many settings, and not just the stage. Stage fright has connotations of distress in front of large audiences, but musical performance anxiety may be elicited in quite intimate surroundings, such as a lesson or audition. It depends on the evaluative nature of the situation, and not on the presence of an audience.<sup>28</sup>

There are many examples of performance anxiety to support Steptoe’s definition.

Musicians are all familiar with the feeling of being nervous in a lesson, where the only audience is one’s teacher. As Steptoe writes, the perceived importance of the situation is the reason for the nervousness, not the literal act of being onstage. A more dramatic example can be seen in the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Glenn D. Wilson and David Roland, “Performance Anxiety,” in *The Science and Psychology of Music Performance: Creative Strategies for Teaching and Learning*, ed. Richard Parncutt and Gary E. McPherson, 46-61 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 47.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Steptoe, “Negative Emotions in Music Making: the Problem of Performance Anxiety,” in *Series in Affective Science*, ed. (series) Richard Davidson, Paul Ekman, and Klaus Scherer; ed. (vol.) Patrik Juslin and John Sloboda, 13: 291-308 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 292.

case of one of my students, a young man who suffers from extreme performance anxiety. This student has feelings of distress through the simple act of holding (or, perhaps even thinking about) the instrument. In fact, even when talking about playing he displays feelings of dread and anxiousness. Again, these feelings are prevalent with or without an audience or stage. Even when he is alone practicing, he feels the need to be perfect, and therefore overvalues the importance of missed notes, etc. His overvaluation of the situation and his perfectionistic attitude create a situation in which he is never “allowed” to be relaxed while playing the instrument, be it onstage, in a lesson, or alone. Throughout this paper, when I use the term “performance anxiety,” I will be assuming Steptoe’s definition.

One thing to keep in mind about performance anxiety is that it is an automatic response to a situation that seems threatening in some way. In addition, the brain remembers past experiences, so if a new performance or series of performances goes badly, the brain will respond with the same feelings of anxiety as it did in the past. However, if one is able to stay detached from negative thoughts or physical distractions, the brain will have a new way of responding to anxiety. Jon Kabat-Zinn writes, “In stressful or threatening situations, your reactions will be highly conditioned and automatic. The deeper levels of intelligence and wisdom that come from clear and full seeing will not be available to you because of this foggy cloud in the mind.”<sup>29</sup> These automatic reactions are controlled by the autonomic nervous system in the human body. If there is a threat, the system kicks in and causes the person to become aroused. If the person is able to detach oneself from the emotions involved in the anxiety, the arousal can be lessened.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Healing Emotions: Conversations with the Dalai Lama on Mindfulness, Emotions, and Health* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Pub., 2003), 114.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

The autonomic nervous system is also what controls the fight-or-flight response. Via messages from the brain, the autonomic nervous system regulates heart rate, muscle tension, and the opening and closing of blood vessels throughout the body.<sup>31</sup> The autonomic nervous system is responsible for preparing the body for whatever action a person is involved in—be it serious physical labor or simply watching television.

### **Manifestations of Performance Anxiety**

According to Steptoe, there are four basic categories into which the manifestations of performance anxiety fall. These categories are: affect, cognition, behavior, and physiology. In the category of “affect” are a range of emotional feelings such as anxiety, dread, or panic; “cognition” encompasses symptoms like memory failure, loss of concentration, and heightened distractibility; “behavior” includes trembling, difficulty moving naturally, and failures in technique; and “physiology” refers to disturbances in breathing, dry mouth, perspiration, high heart rate, etc.<sup>32</sup>

### **Cognitive Factors**

Steptoe points out that there are several “cognitive factors” associated with musical performance anxiety. Typical in musicians with high levels of anxiety are thoughts that disturb one’s ability to focus on the task at hand.<sup>33</sup> Some of the most common disruptions are: catastrophizing, a preoccupation with evaluation by others, a perfectionistic attitude, and a heightened perception of the physical symptoms of anxiety.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 92-93.

<sup>32</sup> Steptoe, 295.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 298-299.

Steptoe defines “catastrophizing” as “...exaggerating in imagination the likelihood and effects of negative events during the performance.”<sup>35</sup> These negative events could be anything from missing notes (and thereby “ruining” the performance), to imagining oneself falling offstage during the performance.

According to Steptoe, another type of distraction during performance occurs when one becomes fixated on how s/he is being evaluated or judged by others. The people who are imagined to be doing the judging can be friends, peers, teachers, or even total strangers. In this situation, the musician worries about not only what others think of the performance itself, but also how they are judged personally.<sup>36</sup>

The third type of distraction Steptoe mentions is an attitude of perfectionism. Having the idea that everything one does must be perfect and done according to idealized standards creates undue anxiety. This attitude is usually accompanied by feelings that if the performance is not perfect, it (and the performer) is worthless. Rod and Eversley Farnbach write that, in this situation, “The cause of anxiety is the danger of being proved to be a failure, stupid, hopeless, worthless, and so on.”<sup>37</sup> In fact, many perfectionistic attitudes about life (and performing) ultimately relate to one’s sense of self-worth. In today’s American society, self-worth is often based on success. One’s sense of being worthy as a human being is frequently linked with how successful one is (or is perceived to be) in the world.<sup>38</sup> There are many problems with this attitude. One problem is how “success” is defined—the word means many different things to different people. Success can be measured in terms of how much money one makes, how “famous” a person is, etc. Success at its most basic level is usually determined by how “good” a

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>37</sup> Rod and Eversley Farnbach, 100.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 68.

person is at what they do, whatever that may be. In the case of musicians, their sense of self-worth can be connected to how well received their performances are.

Another problem with the perfectionist attitude is that perfectionists often do not accept acclaim from other people, so no performance is ever good enough. If a person's self-worth is tied to being successful in a performance, any performance that is "not good enough" is the equivalent to that person not being "good enough." Therefore, if no performance is ever good enough, neither is the perfectionistic performer.<sup>39</sup>

I think this attitude in particular is a problem that most musicians deal with on some level, whether they are conscious of it or not. Obviously, tying one's self-worth to a performance can be the cause for high levels of anxiety. Musician Stuart Dunkel writes, "Risks involving self-esteem are always anxiety-provoking, for more than any other risk they seek to answer the question, 'Am I good enough at what is most important to me?'"<sup>40</sup> This attitude of perfectionism typically goes hand in hand with catastrophizing,<sup>41</sup> one's feeling of self-worth, and occurrences of "self-talk."<sup>42</sup>

"Self-talk" is often the result of underlying beliefs about one's self-worth, one's relation to the world, and one's basic ideas of how things "should" be.<sup>43</sup> Self-talk can be verbal (i.e., literally talking to oneself), but it is usually referred to as the thoughts that plague many people during performing as well as in many daily activities. Although self-talk can be positive, it is typically negative, automatic, and unwanted—it is that voice in the mind telling us we are going to fail. Salmon and Meyer describe self-talk as an "imaginary critic" in one's head.<sup>44</sup> The critic constantly points out mistakes that have happened and the mistakes that could happen. The critic

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Dunkel, 3.

<sup>41</sup> Steptoe, 298.

<sup>42</sup> Salmon and Meyer, 68.

also provides negative thoughts and opinions that even one's worst enemy would not even think. "Listening" to negative self-talk during a performance can be exceedingly distracting and detrimental.<sup>45</sup>

One of the key aspects of "self-talk" as it occurs in the performance situation is that musicians are often so well prepared to play the music that the mind is free to be distracted while the physical tasks are on "auto pilot." In their book on performance anxiety in musicians, authors Paul Salmon and Robert Meyer describe the common occurrence of self-talk during performance:

...one can engage in self-talk and play instrumental music at the same time, because the two involve different expressive modes. This means that while you are performing a piece of music, your mind can wander to thoughts that have nothing to do with the music. This effect is perhaps heightened because most musicians learn—or overlearn—their music so thoroughly that they can perform it without much conscious attention. When the playing becomes automated one's attention is free to wander elsewhere, frequently to irrelevant thoughts. You are, in effect, consciously doing two things at once—performing and thinking—but not directing your full attention to either one. Since these two activities are coincident, not strictly related to each other, you may find yourself attending to first one, then the other, and feeling that you're not focused on the music. Instead, you are consciously aware of both thinking and playing, without being fully involved in either.<sup>46</sup>

Salmon and Meyer get to the heart of the matter, here. I think this particular aspect is a big problem for many musicians, and I will address this later in the paper.

Another disrupting cognitive factor is an increased sensitivity to physical signs of anxiety. Instead of recognizing a quickened heartbeat, etc. as a normal sign of arousal, the performer may interpret the feelings as a sign of "impending collapse" and feel out of control as a result.<sup>47</sup> Many of my students have told me that once they feel a certain symptom (i.e. hands

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<sup>43</sup> Rod and Eversley Farnbach, 34.

<sup>44</sup> Salmon and Meyer, 25.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>47</sup> Steptoe, 299.

trembling) as a dominant sensation, they then allow the physical feelings to trigger unwanted thoughts about the performance. So what might start out as a minor trembling in the hands turns into feelings of being out of control and negative thoughts about the performance.

In all of its manifestations and “symptoms,” I think the anxiety related to performance boils down to a series of “what-ifs.” “What if I’m a failure? What if people think I’m a bad player? What if I never have success as a performer? Etc. Etc.” This is different from fear in that the anxiety is a result of thinking something disastrous (we know not what) might happen. It is the “not knowing what” and the feelings of doom that are out of proportion to reality that characterize these fear feelings as anxiety.

### **Causes of Performance Anxiety**

In addition to the “fight-or-flight” mechanism, there are other factors that lead to performance anxiety. In her book, *Performance Power*, Irmtraud Tarr Krüger mentions three main causes of anxiousness before a performance: 1. the musician’s perceived importance of the event;<sup>48</sup> 2. an avoidance reaction;<sup>49</sup> and, 3. working within a specialized field.<sup>50</sup>

As mentioned above, one of the most fundamental causes of performance anxiety is the performer’s overestimation of the importance of the event. This is most evident in student performers, who tend to believe every performance is a life or death case. What makes this worse is that many students perform so infrequently in a solo capacity. Many students only perform when the stakes seem very high—a jury examination, an audition, or a recital—so they associate every performance with monumental consequences for failure.

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<sup>48</sup> Irmtraud Tarr Krüger, *Performance Power: Transforming Stress Into Creative Energy* (Tempe, AZ: Summit Books, 1993), 69.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-55.

The second factor or cause of performance anxiety is the tendency to avoid the feelings associated with the performance. Instead of working with the feelings of nervousness, musicians often try to avoid the feelings altogether and/or they label the feelings as “bad” or “unpleasant.” By trying to avoid the feelings and/or over-thinking their presence, one tends to make the feelings that much more overbearing. The feelings are able to become more frightening because one begins a thought process that involves turning something as simple as leg trembling into the possibility of falling off of the stage.<sup>51</sup>

A third factor leading to performance anxiety, according to Tarr Krüger, is operating within a very specialized field of study. The more specific one’s area of performing is, the more likely one is to identify with and define oneself in relation to that field. This identification with what one does makes a person more vulnerable to excessive feelings of anxiety. Tarr Krüger writes, “The more specialized, stylized, and restricted our approach is to an area of competence or dexterity, the more vulnerable we become precisely in that place where we define ourselves through our activity.”<sup>52</sup>

To illustrate this point, Tarr Krüger uses an example of the difference between a gypsy musician and a classical violinist. In her example, the gypsy musician plays freely and unanxiously in public, despite her comparative lack of skill on the instrument. The classical violinist, however, is much more vulnerable to anxious feelings while performing in public because the years of training have lead her to identify herself with a certain standard that does not allow for imperfection in any situation.<sup>53</sup>

I have a similar example from my own experience. A friend of mine studied classical saxophone as an undergraduate and got his degree in that field. During college, he joined a rock

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 54-55.



band as a saxophone player. He continued to play in several rock bands after college, making a decent living and gaining a good reputation with those that followed the local music scene. Despite being relatively successful in his performing, he regularly told me that he was uncomfortable playing saxophone in these bands—that he “did not know what he was doing” in that genre. Eventually, he purchased a drum set, taught himself to play, and is now the drummer in a few local rock bands. He feels much more comfortable, and says he has a great time playing. He never enjoyed playing saxophone in rock bands because the training in his field was so specialized that his standards for himself were out of balance with the actual situation. I believe this happens frequently with classical musicians.

### **Facilitating and Debilitating Anxiety**

So far, I have discussed the negative aspects of anxiety in performance—the physical symptoms that can interfere with technique, and the thoughts that can distract one from focusing on the music. The most debilitating aspects of performance anxiety can leave a person unable to function at all under the stress of a performance. If left unchecked, the symptoms can lead to panic attacks at worst and at the very least, unpleasant experiences while performing.

Performance anxiety, or “nervousness” as it occurs regularly before or during performance is not, in itself, a negative thing. In fact, research suggests a certain amount of arousal or nervousness is necessary for a performance. Wilson and Roland (in “Performance Anxiety”) write that without some arousal, performances might come off as “flat” or uninspired.<sup>54</sup> If a musician is not “pumped up” enough or feels uninterested in the music, the performer runs the risk of those feelings being conveyed in the music.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>54</sup> Wilson and Roland, 50.

According to Irmtraud Tarr Krüger, “Performance anxiety comprises both elements: pleasurable anticipation and fear.”<sup>55</sup> The fear element, if not confronted, can lead to a block in creativity if the performer attends to distracting thoughts and feelings instead of the music. The “[pleasurable anticipation]... can be experienced as a state of arousal, a positive stimulus leading to increased watchfulness, to more intensive concentration, and thus improved performance....”<sup>56</sup> As performers, we can make a conscious decision to work with the nervousness we have instead of trying to avoid it.

In his book, *The Musical Temperament: Psychology and Personality of Musicians*, Anthony Kemp describes a study on the effects on anxiety in performing various tasks. Kemp writes,

Powell and Enright (1990) offer a useful example of three different conditions of anxiety imposed upon a simple imaginary task of picking up individual counters from a pile and placing them into a jar. Firstly, you are to take as long as you like, and no-one will check up on you. In the second condition, you are told that for every counter placed in the jar within 30 seconds you will receive a pound coin. In the third condition, for every counter that you fail to get into the jar within the 30 second period you are told that you will have a finger chopped off.<sup>57</sup>

Kemp concludes that in each condition, the anxiety levels are different and thus, affect one’s performance differently. In the first instance, no anxiety is present, and therefore one is hardly motivated to engage in the task at all. In the second scenario, however, there is enough arousal present to complete the task in a very efficient way. On the other end of the spectrum, the third condition creates so much anxiety that the person is unable to perform well at all. This third state might even cause the person to give up trying in a state of panic.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Tarr Krüger, 10.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>57</sup> Kemp, 96.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

Kemp's example leads us to three somewhat similar studies on how anxiety has an effect on one's focus and attention during performance. In the next chapter, I will be discussing the "circle of attention," the "inverted-U," and the "flow state."

## CHAPTER 2. ACCEPTING PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

### Circle of Attention

An important thing to remember about anxiety during performance is that it often has the power to override one's ability to focus on the music itself. This is especially true in situations where the music has been thoroughly (or overly) practiced. The mind is free to wander from the "automatic" motions of physically playing the instrument. That is not to say musicians would be better off not practicing, however. When the music is under-prepared, the anxious thoughts usually stem from just that worry.<sup>59</sup>

In Salmon and Meyer's *Notes From the Green Room*, the authors use an adapted form of Constantin Stanislaviki's "circle of attention" to depict the effect anxiety can have on one's ability to focus during performance. Salmon and Meyer describe the circle "...as analogous to a spotlight shining on a stage. In the center of the beam, the light is most intense, and it gradually fades and then blends into darkness at the edges."<sup>60</sup> In Salmon and Meyer's circle, some of the most basic elements of musical performance are included: interpretive activity, mood and emotion, cognitive processing, and technical and motor skills.<sup>61</sup> The entire circle itself contains one's "conscious attention." The other aspects of performing (mentioned above) all vie for attention, and are located in various parts of the circle. Closest to the center of the circle is "interpretive activity," while "mood and emotion" and "cognitive processing" lie more to the outsides of the circle, but are still in "striking distance" to the center. "Motor and technical skills" are both inside and outside the circle, meaning that the physical aspects of playing are often outside of one's focus altogether.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Salmon and Meyer, 118-119.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 118-119.

In a situation with no anxiety present, one has to deal with these separate factors in deciding where to focus the most attention. When anxiety is present, it can interfere with all of the other elements of performing. What is more problematic is that anxiety symptoms are much more difficult to block out. According to Salmon and Meyer, "...the attention we focus on performing a piece may be usurped by the sensations caused by anxiety, which by their nature, tend to take precedence over other information."<sup>63</sup>

### **Inverted "U"**

In the field of psychology, the Yerkes-Dodson Law (named after its discoverers) is a well-known descriptor of the relationship between arousal and performance.<sup>64</sup> The law uses an inverted "U" curve to depict this relationship. The left side or bottom point of the "U" represents very little arousal or interest in engaging in the performance, whereas the right side represents too much arousal and heightened anxiety. Both of these points of the curve can result in performances that either lack energy or focus. Conversely, the apex of the "U" represents the optimal balance between arousal and a focused performance.<sup>65</sup>

Writer Glenn Wilson has expanded the Yerkes-Dodson Law to a "three dimensional" diagram, allowing for the difficulty of the task and the kinds of stress involved in the performance situation. Wilson argues that "...complex tasks deteriorate more easily under stress than simple ones..." and that the "interplay" among three types of stressors determines whether the anxiety is beneficial to the performance.<sup>66</sup>

Wilson lists three categories that contain similar "sources of stress." The first category is "trait anxiety," which includes "...any personality characteristics, constitutional or learned, that

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>64</sup> Wilson and Roland, 50.

<sup>65</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1997), 84-85.

<sup>66</sup> Wilson and Roland, 50.

mediate susceptibility to stress.”<sup>67</sup> The second category is “situational stress,” which is defined as being anything that is stressful in relation to the situation itself (i.e. a recital, an audition, or a jury). The third category is “task mastery.” In this category are the levels of stress related to how well one knows the music, and one’s skill in performing the music. Obviously, the more prepared one is to perform (the higher the “mastery”), the less stress is involved.<sup>68</sup> In Wilson’s version of the Yerkes-Dodson Law, the kind of stress is taken into account, thereby making a less generalized prediction of performance success. Wilson writes, “...highly anxious individuals perform best when the work is well mastered and the situation relaxed, whereas low-anxiety individuals rise to a challenge and perform better with a more demanding audience.”<sup>69</sup> Again, there is a fine balance between necessary arousal and focused performance.

### **Flow**

Another well-known descriptor of the relationship between arousal and performance is described by author Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as the “flow state.” In his book, *Finding Flow*, Csikszentmihalyi writes,

The metaphor of ‘flow’ is one that many people have used to describe the sense of effortless action they feel in moments that stand out as the best in their lives. Athletes refer to it as ‘being in the zone,’ religious mystics as being in ‘ecstasy,’ artists and musicians as aesthetic rapture. Athletes, mystics, and artists do very different things when they reach flow, yet their descriptions are remarkably similar.<sup>70</sup>

Csikszentmihalyi also uses a graph to depict the flow state. Somewhat similar to Wilson’s extension of the Yerkes-Dodson Law, (but more detailed) the important balance here is between “challenges and skills.”<sup>71</sup> According to Csikszentmihalyi, in order to get to the flow state, both

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 50-51.

<sup>70</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* (New York: BasicBooks, 1997), 29.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 31.

the challenge (the music itself, and/or the performance situation) and one's skills to meet the challenge must be high. When the challenge is high and demands one's full attention, there is no room for distracting thoughts or self-conscious feelings.<sup>72</sup> A real challenge requires intense focus, and if the performer has the requisite skills to meet the challenge, the possibility of reaching the flow state is much greater.

Author Daniel Goleman describes the meaning of the graph very succinctly:

As Csikszentmihalyi told me, 'People seem to concentrate best when the demands on them are a bit greater than usual, and they are able to give more than usual. If there is too little demand on them, people are bored. If there is too much for them to handle, they get anxious. Flow occurs in that delicate balance between boredom and anxiety.'<sup>73</sup>

Aside from just getting the correct balance between challenges and skills for the flow state, Csikszentmihalyi also notes that one must enter challenges where there are specific goals and "relevant feedback."<sup>74</sup> The flow state is most easy to obtain in games or sports when the point of the game is obvious, and the feedback—knowing whether you are performing well—is immediate. Csikszentmihalyi writes, "On the job or at home we might go for long periods without a clue as to how we stand, while in flow we can usually tell."<sup>75</sup> This is why most people can attain flow states in games or sports more easily than in their daily lives.

In his book, *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman provides some neuroscientific explanations of the flow state. During flow, Goleman says the brain actually works more efficiently, and there is much less cortical arousal than is seen when one is anxious or overwhelmed by the activity. Goleman suspects that this efficiency occurs when one is not only focused, but when one's skills are at a high level and one is interested in the challenge. The

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 91.

<sup>74</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, 30.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

brain is also more efficient when the skills are already mastered than they are when one is learning something new or when one has not mastered the skills. Goleman writes, "...when the brain is working less efficiently because of fatigue or nervousness...there is a blurring of the precision of cortical effort, with too many superfluous areas being activated—a neural state experienced as being highly distracted. The same happens in boredom.”<sup>76</sup>

Again, the idea is that one’s skills and challenges must be in proper balance, otherwise, the brain is flooded with thoughts about other things. Undue anxiety can occur when challenges are too high, but distracting thoughts can even occur when challenges are too low.

Further neuroscientific information about what happens to the mind and body during a focused or flow state shows that instead of being overly aroused, one is actually more relaxed. In Goleman’s book *Healing Emotions*, psychology professor Daniel Brown notes the autonomic nervous system is in control of the response that occurs during the flow state. This state is referred to as an “immobile anticipation reaction.” Brown points out that this reaction is the same as the stillness seen in animals when they are frightened. The animal becomes still in order to concentrate attention on the sights, sounds and smells in order to assess the situation.<sup>77</sup>

Brown describes the reaction:

In this case, there is a *decrease* in heart rate...We also see a decrease of muscle tension and a general constriction in the blood vessels both in the skin and in the muscles. A lesser version of this occurs every time we engage in deep concentration to take in information from the world. In our ordinary functioning during any day, we go through periods where we take in information from the world in this concentrated way, and we go through periods where we anticipate a response.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 92-93.

<sup>77</sup> Goleman, *Healing Emotions*, 93.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-94.



## Encounter and Creativity

In his book, *The Courage to Create*, Rollo May argues that the anxiety one feels in performance (or “creation” as he phrases it) is indeed necessary. May believes that it is through a struggle with this anxiety that one is able to make break-throughs and bring new ideas into being. He calls the meeting of the artist and the performance an “encounter.”<sup>79</sup>

Agreeing to the encounter in a performance means agreeing to struggle with the anxiety and the frustration of feeling not up to the task. Like Csikszentmihalyi’s flow state, the challenge must be high enough to push one’s skills to the limit.<sup>80</sup> This is exactly the opposite of the avoidance reaction—in accepting the creative encounter one works with the anxiety instead of trying to flee from it. For May, what separates “creative people” (those who accept the encounter) from others is “...the fact that they can live with anxiety, even though a high price may be paid in terms of insecurity, sensitivity, and defenselessness.”<sup>81</sup>

Indeed, accepting the struggle of a creative encounter can be a very difficult thing to do. The knowledge that one might fail (in front of others) at achieving what one sets out to do is daunting. Even more daunting than failing in front of others is the knowledge that creating what one sees in the “mind’s eye” is rarely ever realized. This is the most important struggle of all—the artist trying to represent his/her own version of reality.<sup>82</sup>

In the case of musical performance, getting the music to come across the way one hears it in the “mind’s ear” is very difficult. This can be even more difficult if one does not have a clear idea of what is coming across to the audience. Musicians often have a specific idea of what they want to “do” with the music—what it should sound like, how the phrases should be shaped, etc.

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<sup>79</sup> Rollo May, *The Courage to Create* (New York: Norton and Co., 1975; Bantam Books, 1976), 87.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

There is often a comparison of the performance as it is to some ideal of how the performance should be. The audience is generally unaware of these subtleties, so a performance can be well received by others when it felt like it “went wrong” to the musician (and vice-versa).

In James Lord’s *A Giacometti Portrait*, the artist Alberto Giacometti is constantly torn between facing the encounter and giving up his art. The anxiety he feels is substantial, and is an excellent example of the struggle May suggests is necessary for “genuine creativity.”<sup>83</sup>

James Lord sat for several sessions while Giacometti painted his portrait. During these sittings, Lord witnessed in Giacometti all of the feelings associated with performance anxiety. According to Lord, Giacometti had a difficult time starting and finishing projects. He would avoid starting on Lord’s portrait everyday by attending to anything and everything he could think of (washing his brushes, working on other projects, etc.) before agreeing to begin another encounter with Lord’s portrait. Lord writes,

He seemed to be avoiding desperately the moment when he would have to start work on something new. He is so poignantly aware of the difficulty of making visible to others his own vision of reality that he must be unnerved by the necessity of having to do it once more. Thus, he would delay as long as possible the decisive act of beginning.<sup>84</sup>

What is also interesting about Giacometti’s process of dealing with a creative encounter is his constant self-doubt, despite high levels of success in his artistic career. This self-doubt is not related to outside success, however, but is connected to his inability to represent what he sees in his “mind’s eye.” During a conversation with Lord, Giacometti comments that when he sees his work in an exhibit, he believes it is better than what other people do, but when he compares

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>84</sup> James Lord, *A Giacometti Portrait* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1965), 6.

his work to what he is actually trying to create, he "...conclude[s] that really [his works are] no good at all."<sup>85</sup>

With all the anxiety and struggle involved in performing or creating, one wonders, "why bother?" Giacometti comments, "As long as there's the slightest chance, I've got to go on."<sup>86</sup> Even a glimmer of hope or an instance of Csikszentmihalyi's flow state is what drives most people to continue with their art.

The struggle with creative encounter is found in all creative acts and all performances, including stand-up comedy. In the documentary entitled *Comedian*, Jerry Seinfeld's return to stand-up (after his extremely successful sitcom, *Seinfeld*) is chronicled over several months. Seinfeld decides to retire his old act and start from scratch with entirely new material. During the process of working on the new material and presenting it to audiences, Seinfeld faces the anxiety of failing at what he loves to do most—perform. Much like Giacometti, Seinfeld admits, "I have this idea of what a comedian is supposed to be, that I'm always trying to live up to, and that I always fall short of."<sup>87</sup> Despite his immense success with the television show and his past success as a stand-up comedian, he continues to try to live up to his own vision of what he wants to create.

And, like Giacometti, being comfortable with the anxiety is still a struggle after the years of experience and success. Seinfeld complains in frustration after a "bad" set:

It's so...hard to get comfortable. It just comes and goes. There are just glimpses, little moments where I feel really like myself and I feel comfortable. And the rest of it, I'm in my father's suit with these huge sleeves and legs, and I'm going... 'What am I wearing? What am I doing here?'<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>87</sup> Jerry Seinfeld, *Comedian*, Produced by Gary Streiner, Directed by Christian Charles (Bridgenorth Films, 2002).

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

Even when things go well from an audience's perspective, Seinfeld is disappointed because he does not perform the set as he had hoped. Like most artists, he focuses on the things that separate the performance from his ideal. He comments, "I guess it's just my nature—it's just never good enough."<sup>89</sup>

In both Seinfeld and Giacometti, we see the frustration and anxiety inherent in the act of creation. What separates them from others is the fact that, despite the anxiety, they continue to agree to the challenge and the encounter.

From here on in the paper, when I use the words "creative" or "creativity," I am referring to it in the way May writes about it. I will use the word to mean what happens when we are engaged and focused on the music and are able to "bring something new into being." The terminology is difficult. As musicians, many of our "creative" decisions are made in the practice room while we are learning and preparing the music for performance. Simply performing on "auto-pilot" may highlight some of the decisions that have already been made; however, when I refer to creativity in the context of performance, I mean engaging in the encounter and working with that experience (the audience, etc.) as it exists in that moment. This, again, is the opposite of the avoidance reaction, of performing in distraction. In the context of this paper, accepting anxiety by working with it as it exists in that moment and focusing one's attention (awareness) during performance, are both important for creativity.

Many times musicians are unwilling or unable to really commit themselves to engaging in the performance. Often, one only commits to walking onstage and hoping to "get through it." The flow state, or creative act, comes about when one is willing to risk failure by struggling through the anxiety. May writes, "We cannot *will* creativity. But we can *will* to give ourselves

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

to the encounter with the intensity of dedication and commitment. The deeper aspects of awareness are activated to the extent that the person is committed to the encounter.”<sup>90</sup>

### **Mind/Body Relationship**

In their article on performance anxiety, Wilson and Roland point out that studies show the mental anxiety in a performance is more detrimental than are physical sensations. They write, “According to Hardy and Parfitt, it is necessary to distinguish cognitive (mental) anxiety from somatic (bodily) agitation. It is primarily the mental component that is likely to show the catastrophic decrement in performance.”<sup>91</sup> I would like to argue that negative thoughts and physical disturbances are simply different manifestations of the same thing (i.e., anxiety), and that one is not necessarily more detrimental than the other.

It is now widely accepted that the mind and body are connected in such a way that one affects the other. I asked a group of my students which symptoms of performance anxiety they had, and which they found more distressing—physical or mental signs. Most of them reported to me that the symptoms (mental and physical) fed off of one another, so that trembling hands caused negative thoughts about the trembling hands, which then caused more errors in technique, which then caused more negative thinking, etc. None of the students reported feeling only physical symptoms without negative thoughts, and vice versa, and none of the students reported one set of symptoms being worse than the other set. Obviously, this was an informal discussion, and not an official research study, however; I think their reports linking the mind and body are important.

One point to consider is that symptoms of anxiety manifest themselves in various ways. Earlier I noted that Irmtraud Tarr Krüger writes that anxiety tends to strike where people are

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<sup>90</sup> May, *The Courage to Create*, 46.

<sup>91</sup> Wilson and Roland, 51.

most vulnerable. If a person is concerned about weaknesses in technique, I think anxiety in performance might manifest itself in a way that hinders technique—either in a physical sensation or in an activity such as over-thinking a technical passage. Similarly, if someone is concerned about what people think about them, the anxiety will most likely manifest itself in a way that reflects this (i.e., negative and/or self-conscious thoughts, etc.)

In his book, *Body Learning: An Introduction to the Alexander Technique*, author Michael Gelb cites a study led by John Basmajian regarding the mind/body relationship. Published in 1963, Basmajian's research consisted of attaching electrodes to volunteers in order to measure the effect conscious and directed thought had on muscle fibers and nerves. Though the specific details of the study are too complicated for the present discussion, what is important is that the studies revealed a link between thought and action. That is, simply thinking about moving a part of the body is enough to set the muscles in action.<sup>92</sup>

Gelb gives an example of this connection by directing the reader to focus attention on his/her right index finger. Gelb then instructs the reader to think about the finger with the intention of pointing it without actually moving it. Paying close attention to the sensations in the finger, one can sense the muscles tighten and ready themselves for motion. This connection between thought and action occurs all of the time, so instantaneously that we are often unaware of it.<sup>93</sup> Gelb writes, "Since every visualization or thought has immediate physiological effects, choosing what one thinks becomes increasingly important."<sup>94</sup> Indeed.

More recent studies in neuroscience have revealed that the brain is also affected by life experience gained from both from physical efforts and psychological events. These findings

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<sup>92</sup> Michael J. Gelb, *Body Learning: An Introduction to the Alexander Technique*, Second Edition (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1995), 74.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

conclude that the brain actually creates new synaptic arrangements throughout a person's life.<sup>95</sup> Because of these new synaptic connections, the brain literally changes with life experience. The brain's ability to change over time in this manner is called "neuroplasticity."<sup>96</sup>

A good example of neuroplasticity can be seen in the brain of a musician as a result of the practicing done in order to learn to play a musical instrument. Daniel Goleman writes, "MRI studies find that in a violinist, for example, the areas of the brain that control finger movement in the hand that does the fingering grow in size. Those who start their training earlier in life and practice longer show bigger changes in the brain."<sup>97</sup>

There have been further studies that involve the emotions and their effect on the brain and on health. There is even a field of study that focuses on research on the brain and emotions called "affective neuroscience."<sup>98</sup> One of the researchers at the forefront of this field is Richard Davidson. Davidson is involved in many studies demonstrating the brain's capacity for neuroplasticity. Not only can the brain change in terms of its actual size, Davidson argues, but emotions and psychological factors can bring about changes in the genes themselves. He comments, "If you are raised in a nurturing environment, there are actually demonstrable, objective changes in gene expression. For example, there are genes for certain molecules that play an important role in regulating our emotions and which respond to nurturing."<sup>99</sup>

There is also more evidence linking emotions and physical health. Davidson points out that the parts of the brain responsible for emotions are also directly connected to the immune system, the endocrine system (which regulates hormones), and the autonomic nervous system. It

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<sup>95</sup> Goleman, *Destructive Emotions*, 23.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

seems that the brain is actually “wired” so that emotions, thoughts, and physical health are connected.<sup>100</sup>

In his 1997 book, *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman discusses the way moods can affect thinking. He describes the human memory as being “state-specific,” so that when we are in a good mood, we remember pleasant things, whereas a bad mood tends to illicit negative events.<sup>101</sup> If one were to follow the thoughts involved in this process, a painful memory could trigger negative thoughts and emotions to the point of changing one’s entire outlook on the situation.

Goleman relates the effect of a good mood to the arousal in the inverted “U” or flow state mentioned earlier. Much like being in the flow state, “Good moods, while they last, enhance the ability to think flexibly and with more complexity, thus making it easier to find solutions to problems, whether intellectual or personal.”<sup>102</sup> If this is true, it would make sense for us to try to not let negative thoughts and feelings take hold of the present moment.

In a performance situation, one’s mood, feelings, and thoughts have the possibility of negatively or positively affecting the performance. We have the choice of getting attached to negative thoughts or letting them go. By staying focused on the music, and not on thoughts and other distractions, we have a much better chance of making the music what we want it to be in that performance. Letting thoughts come and go in a non-judgmental, non-attached way is very difficult and takes practice in our daily lives before we can apply it in a performance. The practice of mindfulness meditation is a way to practice being in the present moment, letting thoughts come and go without attachment. It is my feeling that practicing this form of meditation in our daily lives can eventually have a positive impact on the way we perform—

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>101</sup> Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 85.



allowing us to experience the present moment, and possibly allowing us to set up the right conditions for the flow state.

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

### CHAPTER 3. MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

When the sun shines continuously on a lotus flower, it opens widely, revealing its seedheart. In the same way, through the activity of looking, reality gently reveals itself. In meditation, the subject and object of pure observation are inseparable.<sup>103</sup>

Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*

#### What is Meditation?

In his book, *Mindfulness in Plain English*, Bhante Henepola Gunaratana attempts to demystify meditation for his readers by first explaining what meditation is *not*. There are many common misconceptions about meditation. Often, incorrect assumptions based on religious rituals associated with many meditative practices are to blame. For instance, many people believe meditation is a way of going into some kind of trance and involves escaping reality and/or one's problems. Others believe that meditation is a just a tool for relaxation in which you forget about life's stress by allowing your mind to go blank.<sup>104</sup> Most of these misconceptions are actually the opposite of what meditation is all about.

According to Gunaratana, meditation is a time for experiencing things directly—the opposite of escaping reality. He writes,

[Meditation]...is a practice done with the specific intention of facing reality, to fully experience life just as it is and to cope with exactly what you find. It allows you to blow aside the illusions and free yourself from all the polite little lies you tell yourself all the time. What is there is there.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart: From Mindfulness to Insight Contemplation* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1988), 32.

<sup>104</sup> Gunaratana, 18-19.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

Meditation, therefore, is a process during which one practices dealing with reality instead of avoiding it. As we will see, most people's lives are spent in constant avoidance of the experience of reality; meditation is a time for "running straight into" it.<sup>106</sup>

### **Vipassana Meditation**

"Vipassana" is a word in the Pali language that stems from two root words—"vi" and "passana." The first root word, "vi," is a prefix which translates as "in," "into," or "through" "a special way."<sup>107</sup> "Passana" translates as "seeing or perceiving."<sup>108</sup> Gunaratana writes that the meaning of vipassana "...is looking into something with clarity and precision, seeing each component as distinct, and piercing all the way through to perceive the most fundamental reality of that thing."<sup>109</sup>

Vipassana is also translated as "insight" meditation. This form of meditation is associated with the Theravada sect of Buddhism, and is typically practiced in the cultures of South and Southeast Asia, in the countries of Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, among others.<sup>110</sup> Henepola Gunaratana explains,

Vipassana is the oldest of Buddhist meditation practices. The method comes directly from the *Satipatthana Sutta*, a discourse attributed to the Buddha himself. Vipassana is a direct and gradual cultivation of mindfulness or awareness.... It is an ancient and codified system of training your mind, a set of exercises dedicated to the purpose of becoming more and more aware of your own life experience.<sup>111</sup>

Vipassana meditation practice consists in developing both mindfulness and concentration. Concentration is the ability to focus the mind on a single object without distraction. In Buddhist traditions, this is also known as "one-pointedness." This type of concentration is developed by

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 2-4.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 31.

“forcing” the mind to stay with the object of attention. According to Gunaratana, one-pointed concentration has a quality of determination and willpower—it “keeps the attention pinned down to one item.”<sup>112</sup>

Mindfulness is a translation of two words in the Pali language—*appamada* and *sati*.<sup>113</sup> *Appamada* translates into English as “non-negligence or absence of madness.”<sup>114</sup> *Sati* has several meanings—it can mean either a kind of “activity,”<sup>115</sup> or “bare attention.”<sup>116</sup> Another meaning of *sati* includes the concept of remembering. The remembering associated with *sati* is a mindfulness, i.e., being aware of what one is doing at all times.<sup>117</sup> Gunaratana writes, “[The activity of] Mindfulness is at one and the same time both bare attention itself and the function of reminding us to pay bare attention if we have ceased doing so. Bare attention is noticing.”<sup>118</sup> “Bare” attention means being aware of the present moment without attaching thoughts or judgements to what is happening.

Unlike concentration, mindfulness has nothing at all to do with power or forcing. Instead, mindfulness simply involves noticing what is there—one’s thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and physical sensations—with nonjudgmental awareness.<sup>119</sup> Also, unlike one-pointed concentration, in mindfulness there is no specific object of focus. One is simply aware of sensations as they occur from moment to moment.<sup>120</sup> When one is being mindful, one does not get attached to thoughts or feelings—one makes note of them and then lets them go. If a

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 145-146.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>119</sup> Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, 4.

<sup>120</sup> Gunaratana, 152.

distraction in concentration occurs, mindfulness means noticing the distraction and bringing one's focus back to the task at hand.

In the context of Buddhist culture, vipassana meditation is the way to liberation and enlightenment. By way of the practice, one learns to "...see the truths of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness of phenomena."<sup>121</sup> In this paper, however, I will be concentrating on mindfulness in its secular applications, without the ritual or religious context.

### **Secular Forms of Mindfulness**

One of the leading proponents of mindfulness meditation in the United States is Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn. Kabat-Zinn is the founder of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, where he works with patients with chronic pain and/or other physical disabilities. The patients referred have varying ailments, including heart disease, back pain, and cancer. Kabat-Zinn has been active in research on healing as it is related to the mind and body, and in using mindfulness meditation as a means to allow patients to have some involvement in their own healing.<sup>122</sup> Kabat-Zinn teaches mindfulness not as a path to enlightenment but as way of learning to simply be aware in the present moment. Mindfulness is a way of experiencing life—both the pleasurable aspects and the tragic moments—as they actually exist, not the way one wishes they would be.

At the Massachusetts Medical Center, patients are sent to the stress clinic to embark on an eight-week course integrating mindfulness meditation into their daily lives. Most of the patients referred to the clinic have never done any type of meditation before and are there as a "last ditch" effort to help control their pain.

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>122</sup> Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, 279.

## Types of Mindfulness Practice

Jon Kabat-Zinn teaches his patients four types of mindfulness practice: sitting, walking, the “body scan,” and hatha yoga. In all of these practices, one is mindful of thoughts and sensations in a nonjudgmental, detached way. Not judging means that the events that unfold are not bad or good in themselves, and one thought or feeling is not more or less “real” or important than another. Being detached means allowing thoughts to come and go without following them. Again, instead of grasping onto a memory that occurs and then following that thought chain, being mindful simply means noticing the thought and letting it go. Kabat-Zinn writes,

Another way to look at meditation is to view the process of thinking itself as a waterfall, a continual cascading of thought. In cultivating mindfulness, we are going *beyond* or *behind* our thinking, much the way you might find a vantagepoint in a cave or depression in the rock behind a waterfall. We still see and hear the water, but we are out of the torrent.”<sup>123</sup>

### Breathing

The act of simply noticing things in a detached way is very difficult, especially since most people spend all of their lives doing the opposite. In all of the meditative practices mentioned above, mindfulness is cultivated by focusing on the breath. Using the breath as a focal point is not the same as using an object of focus in the one-pointed concentration. In practicing mindfulness, one uses the breath as a way to bring the mind back from any distractions that occur during meditation.<sup>124</sup> Again, this is not a forceful action, one does not force the mind to stay on the breath, rather one notices when the thoughts have taken one away from the breathing and then shifts attention back to the breathing. While focusing on the breath, one usually picks a specific place on the body (either the nostrils or belly) to notice. Paying attention to the breathing at the nostrils, one feels the sensation of the

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 94.

air entering and leaving the very tip of the nose, and also the sensation of the air travelling into the nasal cavity all the way to the throat, as far as one can feel. One also notices the length of each breath, both on inhalation and exhalation. Focusing on the belly, one notices the feeling of the belly expanding and contracting with each breath, as well as the length and depth of the breath, etc.<sup>125</sup>

One thing to remember is that paying attention to the breath does not mean “thinking” about breathing, or trying to make the breath different than it is. Mindfulness involves seeing what is there, not trying to breathe a certain way or think a certain way.<sup>126</sup>

### Sitting Meditation

Sitting meditation is probably the image people have when they think of meditation. Sitting is a “formal” style of meditation, one which most meditators consider an essential part of the practice. In sitting meditation, one literally sits in a special posture, for a specific amount of time, for the purpose of paying attention to moment-to-moment experiences. There are many postures that one can assume for this practice, some are related to Buddhist traditions.<sup>127</sup> The different postures are beyond the scope of this paper, however, and will not be discussed here. What one notices during sitting is that after a short period of time, the mind wanders from the breath and becomes easily distracted. These distractions are both in the form of thought processes and physical discomfort. By mindfully bringing the focus back to the breath, one notices the thoughts and physical sensations dissipate on their own. These distractions only last a moment, and then are replaced by other thoughts or sensations. If one is not mindful, however, a simple distraction can lead to an entire chain of thoughts and/or an automatic physical

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<sup>124</sup> Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, 15.

<sup>125</sup> Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness* (New York: Delta, Random House, 1990), 51-52.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

response. For example, one common distraction in meditation is a feeling of itching. Practicing mindfulness, one would simply note the feeling of itching and not continue to think about it. If one were not being mindful, the itching could immediately provoke a movement to scratch the itch. The motion is sometimes so automatic that one makes a movement to scratch at the instant one senses the feeling.<sup>128</sup>

### Walking Meditation

Walking is a less formal form of meditation but is still done with mindfulness. In this form of meditation, one walks with awareness of all of the sensations evoked during the process of moving the foot to the ground, shifting weight, etc. Walking meditation is especially interesting because walking is something that almost everyone does without any thought at all. For most people, walking is a truly automatic function. During mindfulness of walking, one pays attention to every aspect of motion, as if walking for the first time. The walking is done at varying paces, usually beginning in very slow motion with the utmost attention to every detail of the process. During this meditation, the attention is generally on the walking, but the breath is again a good way to bring one's wandering attention back to the walking.<sup>129</sup> As I will discuss in the next chapter, walking is very similar to playing a musical instrument in that it becomes a very automatic process over time.

### Body Scan

The body scan meditation is done lying down. The meditator begins by noticing the breathing, and then focuses attention on specific parts or areas of the body. In Jon Kabat-Zinn's description of this technique, one begins with the toes of the left foot, and shifts attention slowly up the left foot, ankle, calf, thigh, and pelvic region. Attention is then directed to the toes of the right foot,

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 64.



up the right leg in a manner similar to that on the left side of the body and eventually to the different regions of the torso, arms, head, and face.<sup>130</sup> Like the other meditative practices, when attention wanders, one uses the breath to bring attention back to the area of concentration. The body scan is done very slowly. In Kabat-Zinn's stress reduction program, this meditation takes forty-five minutes to complete.

The body-scan technique helps people get in touch with feelings that are occurring in the body in that moment. Most of the time, physical tensions develop in the body without our awareness. We tend not to notice muscle tension until it builds to the point of injury. As I will discuss later, physical awareness is another important aspect of playing a musical instrument. This kind of awareness might be the key in preventing common overuse problems in instrumentalists.

#### Other Types of Mindfulness

As I stated earlier, Kabat-Zinn also teaches mindfulness in yoga practice at the clinic. Kabat-Zinn writes, "...bringing mindfulness to any activity transforms it into a kind of meditation. Mindfulness dramatically amplifies the probability that any activity in which you are engaged will result in an expansion of your perspective."<sup>131</sup> Mindfulness can be practiced at any time, in moving exercises like yoga, and in everyday activities as well.

In *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, Thich Nhat Hanh suggests practicing mindfulness as often as possible in all aspects of one's life. He writes,

You've got to practice meditation when you walk, stand, lie down, sit, and work, while washing your hands, washing the dishes, sweeping the floor, drinking tea, talking to friends, or whatever you are doing....<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 114-116.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 76-77.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>132</sup> Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, 24.

If one completes everyday tasks while thinking of other things, one is “incapable of living during [that] time” according to Nhat Hanh.<sup>133</sup> For example, if one thinks about the events that occurred earlier in the day while washing dishes, one is not living in the present moment. Instead of experiencing washing the dishes (i.e., feeling the soap on one’s hands, hearing the sound of the running water, etc.), one is caught in a chain of thoughts. This chain of thoughts is a distraction that takes one away from experiencing reality. Practicing mindfulness makes us aware of how little time is spent living in the present.

There are many other examples from one’s daily life in which mindfulness is usually lacking. One good example is eating. Most people eat very quickly, without actually tasting the food, smelling the food, or feeling the texture of the food in the mouth. It is amazing how often people eat while doing other things—watching television, talking to friends, or driving. When food is consumed during these other activities, it is very easy to be so unaware that the food is gone without having had any real experience of eating. Like most reoccurring tasks, eating can become a very automatic process if one is not mindful.

### **Beginner’s Mind**

Mindfulness is the practice of encountering each moment as a new and different experience. There is an almost child-like quality to experiencing life in this manner. Children often examine ordinary objects in a very interested, mindful way. The idea of experiencing things as if for the first time is often referred to as “beginner’s mind.”<sup>134</sup>

Adults rarely embark on daily life with a beginner’s mind. In fact, most people do not realize that each moment of life is a brand new experience. This is because we tend to conceptualize each encounter in our lives. Conceptualizing means “pasting” thoughts or ideas

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living*, 35-36.

onto each experience instead of facing the experience directly.<sup>135</sup> We tend to assume we already know all there is to know about things we have experienced in the past. We make up our minds about things and live life according to those concepts. There are many examples of this. When we see grass, we rarely look at individual blades of grass. If we did, we would realize they are all different. We also make up our minds about people, deciding once and for all that we like or dislike someone. If we dislike someone, we are often unable to listen to what that person is saying and take it for what it is. Instead, we pre-decide that what they are saying is unimportant. Perhaps we do not hear what they are saying because we are too busy having negative thoughts about them instead of listening.

I have an interesting example using my dog to illustrate conceptualizing experience. My dog loves to eat, and will eat anything. If I give her something that she has never eaten (a piece of peach, for instance), she will take it in her mouth, swish it around, then spit it out. Once out of her mouth, she will then smell the peach and lick it. Then, she will take it in into her mouth again, slowly chew it, and then eat it. However, if I give her another piece of the same peach, she will take it and swallow it whole. Somehow she has decided that she already likes the peach and there is no need to “waste time” tasting it again.

Humans do this all the time as well. When we hear a sound, we immediately hear the sound *as something*. For instance, if we hear the sound of a motorcycle driving by, we do not hear the sounds themselves as simply sounds. Rather, we hear the noise, and automatically have an image of the motorcycle, and possibly the person riding the motorcycle. We associate the sounds with an engine and/or gravel crunching under the tires. We usually get a very distinct and vivid picture in our mind’s eye of what is making the sounds.

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<sup>135</sup> Gunaratana, 143.

Bhante Henepola Gunaratana writes, “When you first become aware of something, there is a fleeting instant of pure awareness just before you conceptualize the thing, before you identify it. That is a state of awareness.”<sup>136</sup> This brief moment of awareness happens to me occasionally when I am driving my car. Sometimes I will see something on the side of the road and have no idea what the object is. When I get closer to the object, there is an almost tangible “click” in my mind when I realize what it is. In the moment when I am confused about what the thing is, I find it extremely worthy of attention, but when I “figure out” it is a trash bag my attention immediately shifts onto something else. Obviously, a certain amount of conceptualization is required in order to live in the modern world, especially while driving a car. However, we do not always have to function in this automatic mode.

Gunaratana explains that we tend to “categorize” experiences. Every time we encounter something, we immediately judge whether it is “good,” “bad,” or “neutral.” If something is “good,” we tend to grasp on to the experience. We try to hold on to or repeat the experience as much as possible. If something is “bad,” we do the opposite—we push the experience away and try to avoid it at all costs. Finally, if we have a “neutral” experience, we ignore it altogether. Gunaratana writes, “The direct result of all this lunacy is a perpetual treadmill race to nowhere, endlessly pounding after pleasure, endlessly fleeing from pain, and endlessly ignoring 90 percent of our experience.”<sup>137</sup>

### **Selflessness**

One of the most important aspects of meditation practice is “selflessness.” Selflessness (“*anatta*”) is a term translated from the Pali language which means, “...the absence of a

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 10.

permanent, unchanging entity that we call...Self.”<sup>138</sup> The Dalai Lama, in his book *Stages of Meditation*, describes two types of selflessness—that of persons and that of phenomena.<sup>139</sup>

Selflessness of persons means that there is no actual “self” or “ego” that exists independently of anything else. We often think of ourselves as a concrete entity made up of thoughts, feelings, and memories which exists separately of the outside world. We have a sense that there is an “I” that is “solid and continuous” despite what happens around us at any time. Because of this belief of an “I” or ego, we suffer in an attempt to hold onto this idea of a separate self.<sup>140</sup> Through the practice of mindfulness, we can become aware of our tendency to grasp onto the concept of self. If we can notice the transience of thoughts, and notice that thoughts are often quite removed from reality, we can begin to see how our sense of self is a confused concept.

Gunaratana describes the concept of “I” as “...something extra that is added to the pure experience.”<sup>141</sup> In other words, instead of experiencing things directly as they are, we experience things through our own lens of ego. When we talk to people, we interact with them in a way that has an “I versus them” attitude. We see ourselves as completely distinct and separate, and we tend to react and respond to what the other person says depending on how what they say will affect us. For example, a good friend of mine recently told me he was planning a road trip to San Francisco with one of his childhood friends from another country. My friend knew that I have always wanted to visit San Francisco, but that I have never been there. During the conversation about this trip, I kept wondering why he had decided to go with someone else to a city he knew I wanted to visit! He could have picked any place in the U.S., but picked San Francisco. Rather than being excited for him, I was focused on how his trip affected me.

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>139</sup> The Dalai Lama, *Stages of Meditation*, Translated by Venerable Geshe Lobsang Jordhen, Losang Choepel Ganchenpa, and Jeremy Russell (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2001), 123.

<sup>140</sup> Chögyam Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1973; 2002). 5.

The Dalai Lama explains that phenomena are selfless in that they lack “true existence.”<sup>142</sup> He writes, “When we say things lack true existence, we mean that things exist under the sway of the mind to which they appear, and that objects do not have a unique or substantial existence from their own side.”<sup>143</sup> If we realize that the object is being perceived through our own mind (which also lacks “true existence”), we realize also that the object can appear very different when the perception changes. For example, if one were to look at a leaf through a microscope, the leaf would appear to be very different than if viewed with the naked eye. Under the microscope, the leaf might look like a collection of circles or lines. Viewing the leaf this way, would we say that each atom of the leaf exists independently?

Another example can be found in the perception of sound. For instance, if I listen to a recording on my car stereo, it sounds quite different from when I listen to it on my home stereo. The recording itself has not changed, but rather the “lens” through which I am listening to it (the stereo) has.

In a conventional sense, objects do exist, but they exist only in relation to other things. Phenomena (objects) are said to lack true existence because they are subject to the laws of cause and effect. For example, a tree lacks true existence because it does not exist independently of nature. The tree grew from a seed, which came from another tree. The seed had to have enough water, sunlight and nourishment from the soil to grow. Even now, the tree is dependent on the surroundings for its existence. Therefore, it lacks true, or independent existence.

### **Studies in Neuroscience**

Earlier in the paper I discussed studies done by Richard Davidson and others regarding emotions and thoughts and their impact on the body. Davidson has also been involved in

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<sup>141</sup> Gunaratana, 132.

<sup>142</sup> The Dalai Lama, *Stages of Meditation*, 124.

research suggesting meditation can play a positive role in the mind/body connection by improving immune system function. In Davidson's study, volunteers were chosen from a biotechnology company to learn meditation. The volunteers were separated into two groups—one group went through Jon Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness program and the other group was told they were being put on a waiting list for the meditation. Before the eight-week mindfulness program, the volunteers from both groups went through various blood tests and were hooked up to a special EEG machine which read their brain activity. At the end of the eight weeks, both groups were then given the flu vaccine. According to Davidson, one way of testing immune function is by taking samples of blood in order to see how the patient responds to the vaccine.<sup>144</sup> The studies revealed that the meditation group had a better response to the vaccine than did the control group.<sup>145</sup>

In previous studies, Davidson found that meditators who had been practicing for many years (monks) had dramatic shifts in brain activity and immune system function. What is interesting about the studies mentioned above is that the brain activity and immune function were changed even in people who had not been meditating very long. In fact, many of the volunteers reported not doing any formal mindfulness practice outside of the class meetings. Davidson suggests that the new meditators were, however, practicing mindfulness in their daily lives and that that was enough to show the changes.<sup>146</sup>

These studies, though preliminary, are extremely important in that they provide scientific evidence that meditation does have a positive effect on the body. Through the practice of

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Destructive Emotions*, 343.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 345.

mindfulness in our everyday lives, we can handle stress and anxiety more effectively. This in turn has a measurable effect on our physical health as well.

In the next chapter, I will discuss how mindfulness meditation can be applied to practicing and performing music.



## CHAPTER 4. MINDFULNESS MEDITATION AND PERFORMANCE

There is no reason why mindfulness should be different from focusing all one's attention on one's work, to be alert and to be using one's best judgment. During the moment one is consulting, resolving, and dealing with whatever arises, a calm heart and self-control are necessary if one is to obtain good results.... If we are not in control of ourselves but instead let our impatience or anger interfere, then our work is no longer of any value.<sup>147</sup>

Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*

### Mindfulness in Daily Life

As we have seen, mindfulness can be practiced in a formal way as well as in everyday activities. Because the fight-or-flight mechanism produces an automatic reaction to many of our stressful experiences, practicing mindfulness during ordinary moments is very important. In general, we tend to let our thoughts, emotions, and feelings dictate how we handle difficult situations when we feel threatened. Therefore, in order to make mindfulness more “automatic,” we need to practice it regularly, and not just save it for those times when we think we might need it.<sup>148</sup>

In his book *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*, Nathaniel Branden discusses the importance of regularly engaging in what one is doing. While Branden is not talking about meditation specifically, he is talking about one's ability to be focused in the moment. He writes, “The more consistently and conscientiously a man maintains a policy of being in full mental focus...of judging the facts of reality that confront him, of knowing what he is doing and why, the easier and more ‘natural’ the process becomes.”<sup>149</sup>

As I have been discussing so far in the paper, this is the opposite of what one usually practices on a daily basis. If we continually practice being out of the moment—thinking about

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<sup>147</sup> Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, 14.

<sup>148</sup> Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, 111.

<sup>149</sup> Nathaniel Branden, *The Psychology of Self-Esteem* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 45.

the past or future, we can hardly expect ourselves to be able to be focused during a performance, which is a time of increased arousal and stress. Branden addresses this issue:

What repeated evasion and irrationality can affect is not the ability to choose to focus, but the efficiency, speed and productiveness of a given thinking process. Since the habitual evader has spent his time, not on improving the efficacy of his mind, but on sabotaging it, he suffers the consequences in terms of mental strain, slowness, internal chaos, when he does decide to [focus].<sup>150</sup>

Again, the point is, in order to be mindful in performance, we must also be mindful during ordinary activities. If we spend our lives out of touch with the present, we can hardly expect to bring full awareness to performing.

In chapter two, I noted the point by Salmon and Meyer that musicians are capable of playing music and thinking about unrelated things simultaneously. This ability is not limited to high stress situations or performances. In fact, musicians tend to practice not being mindful right along with practicing the instrument. When one is first learning music, a great deal of attention and focus is necessary to master the technical aspects of the piece. However, the more one practices a particular passage, the less attention is needed. Over time, one is able to pay less attention to the music and more attention to other unrelated thoughts. In a way, this is the purpose of practicing—to be able to play the music with ease, to be able to focus on the phrasing instead of the technique, and to be able to physically continue playing if a distraction occurs during performance. Mastering the technical aspects of a piece frees us to focus on how we want the phrases to be shaped and how we want the music to come across to the listener. However, all too often musicians practice thinking about other things while playing instead of being in touch with the more subtle aspects of the music. If one can learn to be mindful during practice (like in other ordinary activities), being mindful during performance will be a more “natural” response.

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 46.

## Reacting versus Responding

In *Full Catastrophe Living*, Jon Kabat-Zinn uses the term “stress reaction” as a label for the automatic feelings and emotions triggered by stress and anxiety. This is the typical fight-or-flight mechanism that I have mentioned throughout the paper. According to Kabat-Zinn, we do have a choice about whether or not to react to stress in this way. By “stepping back” out of the flow of thoughts instead of getting caught up in them, we can “respond” to the stress with awareness and mindfulness. In this way, we can notice our thoughts and feelings and make decisions appropriate to the situation rather than letting our emotions take over.<sup>151</sup> Kabat-Zinn writes,

If you manage to remain centered in that moment of stress and recognize both the stressfulness of the situation *and* your impulses to react...you have already introduced a new dimension into the situation. Because of this, you don't have to suppress all your thoughts and feelings associated with heightened arousal to prevent yourself from going out of control.... Being conscious in the present, you can easily recognize these agitations for what they are, namely *thoughts and feelings and sensations*.<sup>152</sup>

In a performance, one can be aware of the thoughts and feelings linked to high levels of arousal without becoming attached to them. If we “react” to distracting thoughts or sensations by following the thoughts and likewise reacting physically, we are taken away from the present moment and away from the music. By “responding” to the situation, we notice the thoughts and sensations, but are able to let them go. In a mode of response, we are also able to stand back from the torrent and work more effectively with the present moment. The thoughts and feelings can be noticed with detachment—as just thoughts rather than as representations of reality.

Likewise, in a non-reactive mode we are better able to handle unexpected events during performance—i.e., unusual errors, distractions from the audience, mistakes from the people we

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<sup>151</sup> Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living*, 265-266.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

are playing with, etc. If we can learn to be aware of our tendency to react rather than respond in performance, we might be able to eventually choose the response mode rather than the reaction mode. And by responding to the stress of performing, we will be better equipped to make creative decisions and encounter (rather than avoid) the moment.

In the fight-or-flight reaction, the muscles tighten to prepare for conflict. For example, we are all familiar with how the body reacts when one hears a loud, unexpected noise. In a similar way, when one reacts to a situation rather than responding, the muscles can also be tense. As noted previously, negative feelings express themselves in the body as well. When we try to avoid something we do not like—a person, feeling, experience—the muscles tighten automatically. If this reaction occurs while playing an instrument, the tension might show itself in the phrase, cause the technique to suffer, and, over time, lead to injury.

### **Mindfulness and Symptoms of Performance Anxiety**

#### Physical Symptoms

Being mindful is the key to working with both mental and physical symptoms of performance anxiety. As we have seen, eliminating anxiety is not the goal—what is important is learning to work with what exists, be it a mental or physical distraction.

Being aware of what our bodies are doing in response to the stress of playing an instrument is important. If we can detect physical tension and release it before it becomes a problem, we can save ourselves from years of abuse to our bodies. As mentioned above, being unaware of physical tension can lead to overuse injuries such as tendonitis and carpal tunnel syndrome, and can also impair one's ability to express oneself musically on the instrument. For instance, tension in the arms or hands might lead to choppy or aggressive sounding phrases when the music is intended to be smooth and fluid.

Mindfulness practice including the body scan and walking meditation are good methods for becoming more in tune with what physical sensations we are feeling in our bodies. By practicing noticing how we feel throughout the day (even when we are practicing music) we can learn to be more aware of unnecessary tension.

Musicians need to be aware that physical symptoms such as shaking, heart palpitations, and nausea are often part of being ready for the performance. If we practice working with unpleasant physical sensations in meditation, we will realize that these feelings have a start and an end—we do not have to get caught up in the feelings, nor do we need to avoid them. If we can learn to notice unpleasant feelings and let them go in practice, we have a much better chance of being mindful during performance. Again, we have a choice whether to react or respond to stress, but we need to practice making the right choice.

#### Cognitive Symptoms

Self-talk during performance is a big distraction for many performers. However, self-talk loses its control over one's attention if one is able to notice the thoughts and let them go. Recently, one of my students gave an informal performance for a group of his peers, during which he made several mistakes that caused him to lose focus to the point that he had to restart certain passages. After the performance, I asked him what he was thinking about when the mistakes occurred. He told me that he was thinking, "Don't mess up, don't mess up...." By restarting the passage, he was able to refocus his attention to playing the music; however, stopping and restarting is obviously not an acceptable way of bringing one's focus back to the music in a performance.

This same student also practices getting distracted by self-talk in various situations. When playing scales in a lesson, he often makes seemingly strange mistakes. He is able to

accurately tell me the notes in the scales, but sometimes misses the notes when playing them. He has told me that when he makes mistakes on the scales, it is because he is thinking “I know this, why am I messing it up?” instead of focusing his attention on the task itself. When he plays the scales correctly, his attention is on the scale—specifically the notes and fingerings he needs to remember.

Another cognitive distraction in performance is when one’s mind goes “blank.” This, like many distractions, occurs as a result of avoiding rather than encountering the situation. As I have noted, musicians often learn the music to the point that the technical aspects of playing take very little attention. Because the music is learned so thoroughly, a performer can often “shut-off” the mind while playing. The problem with performing under these circumstances is that it leaves no room for creative encounter during the performance. The performer has made all of the creative decisions in the practice room, and simply functions on auto-pilot for the performance. The performance could still be considered “good,” however, this mode of performing is nearly equivalent to playing a recording and “fingering along” with it. Being mindful and allowing oneself to experience the performance and work with anxious feelings is the key to keeping one’s focus and being creative while playing.

One thing that must be realized is that focusing one’s attention on the performance is not the same thing as thinking about playing, or thinking about focusing. During the performance, the mind should be aware and alert to the present. As we have seen throughout the paper, thoughts often take one’s mind away from focus.

Approaching each performance with beginner’s mind is a way of accepting the fact that each performance is different from the last. Many people are conditioned over time to think that because they have performed poorly in the past, they will necessarily perform poorly in the

future. Falling into this way of thinking is especially easy if certain mistakes happen again and again in performance. For example, if someone were to perform the same piece three days in a row, and miss the same technical passage each time, they might begin to think, “I always miss that.” Conceptualizing the experience in this way can act as a means of reinforcing the mistakes. In other words, people often begin to confuse their musical and personal identity with the performance—they view the mistakes in the performance as something characteristic of themselves. When this type of conceptualization is in reference to a positive attribute (i.e., “I am really good at playing the fast passages”), it can sometimes act as a boost to confidence. However, even identifying oneself in this way can lead to problems if the performances start going badly. One might begin feeling “washed up.”

Students often conceptualize and identify with performing experiences. A few months ago, I was sight-reading duets with one of my college students. In terms of technical difficulty, the duets were far easier than any of the music she had been preparing and playing in her lessons. Despite this, she was making countless mistakes and stopping every two measures. I asked her what the problem was, and she cried exasperatedly, “I’m just no good at this! I’ve never been good at sight-reading—ever since middle school!” At some point in her past, she had been unsuccessful at sight-reading, and had determined she was not good at it, and that not being “good” at sight-reading was part of her identity as a musician.

Instead of conceptualizing in the ways mentioned above, we can practice taking each performance as a chance to encounter something new. We can learn to approach each performance with beginner’s mind. Because something “bad” happened last time, does not mean we need to think it will happen that way again.

## Selflessness and Performance

Is it 'I' who draw the bow, or is it the bow that draws me into the state of highest tension? Do 'I' hit the goal, or does the goal hit me?...Bow, arrow, goal and ego, all melt into one another, so that I can no longer separate them. And even the need to separate has gone. For as soon as I take the bow and shoot, everything becomes so clear and straightforward and ridiculously simple....<sup>153</sup>

Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*

In performance situations, most debilitating anxiety occurs because of an overwhelming degree of attention to oneself. In cases of self-talk and self-consciousness, the focus is on how one will be affected by mistakes or catastrophic events that might happen during the performance. Thoughts such as “What will they think of me? What if I perform badly?” occur only if the performer is concerned with preserving a solid sense of ego. If the focus is shifted from the performer’s sense of self to encountering the music, the sense of self is left behind.

Selfishness conceives of a separate “I” who experiences the performance as a conceptualized event; selflessness involves seeing the connections between the performer and the music, the performer and the audience, and the performer and the instrument. By focusing on the music instead of the anxiety, the performer lets go of the ego and the performer and the music are seen as one entity rather than two independent ones.

In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, psychiatrist Viktor Frankl calls the anxiety related to phobias and neuroses “anticipatory anxiety.” The person suffering this type of anxiety anticipates a certain unwanted thing to happen, and as a result, it does. Frankl cites an example of a person who is afraid that walking into a room full of people will cause him to blush. By being afraid of blushing, and then concentrating on not blushing, he will be more likely to blush

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<sup>153</sup> Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, Translated by R.F.C. Hull, With an Introduction by D.T. Suzuki (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953; Vintage Spiritual Classics, 1999), 61.



when he enters the room.<sup>154</sup> Frankl uses the term “hyper-reflection” to describe the act of dwelling on, or over-thinking a problem or challenge.<sup>155</sup>

Frankl suggests “dereflecting” or, focusing one’s attention away from oneself and instead on the appropriate aspect of the situation.<sup>156</sup> While performing, a musician cannot suffer from debilitating anxiety if the focus is away from the self and on the music. If one is connected to the music in the performance, that is a form of selflessness.

Frankl also mentions two types of intention in his discussion on anticipatory anxiety. One type of intention is “hyper-intention,” which is when someone tries to force something to happen.<sup>157</sup> In the blushing example from above, if the person tried to blush, he could not make himself do it. In a similar way, a musician could not force his hands to shake or force his mouth to feel dry before a performance.

The second type of intention Frankl mentions is “paradoxical intention.”<sup>158</sup> Frankl gives an example of a man who has a fear of sweating in public. Frankl suggests that if the man begins to sweat, he should reveal to the public just how much he is sweating rather than trying to conceal it. Allowing others to see his profuse sweating requires a certain amount of detachment from one’s ego.<sup>159</sup> Similarly, if a performer can learn to detach from his sense of self, and be willing to allow people to see his mistakes, the anxiety will lose its hold.

### **Mindfulness and Encounter**

A very important aspect of mindfulness is accepting the present moment instead of turning away from it, avoiding it, or wishing it were somehow different. Very early one

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<sup>154</sup> Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Revised and Updated (NY: Pocket Books/Simon and Schuster, 1984), 145.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 146-147.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 147.

morning, my neighbor's dog began barking relentlessly. The dog is very small and has an irritating, "yapping" bark. The incessant barking woke me up, and I realized that the dog was not going to stop barking anytime soon. I decided instead of lying there thinking about how angry I was at the dog, how annoying the bark was, etc., I would "turn into" the sound of the barking. Instead of trying to ignore the barking, I really listened to the sound of it. I noticed it had a particular rhythm of two longer, lower pitched "yaps," and then a shorter, higher, "yip" at the end. This pattern repeated itself throughout the tirade. By turning into the sounds, I let go of the negative thoughts and feelings and was really involved in the present moment. I allowed myself to experience that moment as it was rather than wishing it were different. After spending a few minutes listening, I was able to fall back to sleep quickly. If I had chosen to continue trying to ignore the dog, my negative feelings probably would have built up to the point where I would have gotten out of bed altogether, and possibly carried those feelings around all day.

Similarly, if we can turn into the feelings of nervousness before a performance and really allow ourselves to be with the experience, I think this will help minimize negative thoughts in relation to those feelings. Instead of thinking, "Why are my hands shaking? I'll never be able to play the section at letter 'A' like this, etc.," we can notice the sensations and our thoughts about them and know that the thoughts and feelings are transitory—they can come and go without attachment if we let them.

As I mentioned earlier in the paper, experienced musicians have the ability to play their instruments while thinking of unrelated things. The physical act of playing an instrument, like other repetitive activities, often requires only a small amount of focused attention. Walking and eating are examples I have used earlier in the paper. When we walk, we are rarely aware of the walking itself—it is done automatically unless we are injured and have difficulty walking. I am

not advocating over-thinking how to walk, just being in the experience of it. Similarly, mastering the technical aspects of a musical instrument allows us to play while focusing most of our attention on phrasing or other aspects of the music. This is usually a positive thing, unless we allow our minds to be focused on nothing or on negative or distracting things. If musicians can practice being mindful while in informal situations, the chances of being mindful during the challenge of a performance are much greater.

Distractions can occur in various ways during performance. Sometimes musicians are unfocused throughout the entire performance. Many times, however, musicians become distracted at certain moments during performance. For example, if a very difficult passage is coming up in the music, one's mind might "go blank" as a way of avoiding trying to deal with the passage. In this instance, one stops focusing for a moment, and "hopes for the best." This strategy is rarely effective. Another musician might begin over-thinking the upcoming passage, or engaging in self-talk, such as "Here comes that run, don't forget to use the side fingering...." Both of these scenarios take one's attention off the present measure or musical passage. If the music is so well prepared that we do not need to think about the physical aspects, we can still be focused on how we are trying to present the music. Even if the physical challenge of the music is not that high, the challenge lies in presenting the music to the audience.

"What is there is there."<sup>160</sup> Practicing mindfulness gives us the flexibility to work with the reality of the situation, instead of wishing things were different. If the piano player makes a mistake, we can work with it. If we make a mistake, we can work with it. If our instrument is in need of repair, we can work with it. If we are more nervous than we thought, we can work with it. If we wish we had more time to prepare, we can work with it. Creativity comes out of the struggle with encounter. Mindfulness practice teaches us to agree to accept the encounter and

work with reality as it exists. Many problems of performance are due to reaction and avoidance. We can choose to accept and encounter the moment by turning into the performance, and turning into the experiences whether we like them or not.

### **Mindfulness and Emotion—Getting Focused**

Thich Nhat Hanh compares the activity of the mind to a glass of cloudy apple juice. When first poured into the glass, the juice is cloudy, with particles of the pulp moving frantically about. Once the cider sits in the glass for a period of time, the particles settle to the bottom of the glass, leaving the juice still and clean. In much the same way, our minds can become still through the act of sitting and allowing the thoughts to settle.<sup>161</sup>

There is a well-known mindfulness exercise that involves eating raisins very slowly and deliberately. In this exercise, one takes a single raisin into his or her hand and examines the raisin, noting its texture, shape, color, smell, and so forth. Then, one puts the raisin in the mouth and again notices the texture, feeling, and taste of the raisin for a moment without chewing it. Once one experiences the raisin in this way, one then bites into it, and chews it, all while being aware of these aspects of the raisin. This exercise can be very interesting, especially since most adults would never eat a raisin this way.<sup>162</sup>

I introduced the raisin-eating technique to a couple of my students. After the exercise, they reported that they had never actually stopped and tasted a raisin before, and that they were amazed at how flavorful a single raisin is. About a week after this experiment, one of the students told me that one day he had been feeling very angry, and he took the box of raisins I had given him, and mindfully ate a few of the raisins. He said that by doing this he was able to settle his mind by focusing on the raisins instead of following his anger and the thought chains that

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<sup>160</sup> Gunaratana, 25.

<sup>161</sup> Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 3-4.

anger might have produced. In a similar way, we can learn to let the mind settle before we walk on stage for a performance, rather than letting the thoughts and emotions take hold.

### **Pedagogy**

Although it is one of the most important aspects of a musician's life, learning how to perform is an often overlooked topic. Most musicians receive some guidance before a performance to help calm the nerves, but are rarely taught to practice with these ideas in mind. I think an awareness of one's own feelings of anxiety, and, more importantly, an awareness of how one can work with one's anxiety is helpful. Through the practice of mindfulness, one can become more sensitive to mental and physical reactions to anxiety, and perhaps then be able to decide to not get caught in the throes of emotions, thoughts and sensations. By learning to work with feelings of anxiety by accepting the encounter of the performance, the possibility of creativity is much higher.

In 1954, writer Aldous Huxley argued for an education that teaches people to open themselves up to less verbal methods of communication, and for an education that provides for the "practice of heightened creativeness."<sup>163</sup> Huxley was primarily writing about the use of mescaline to expand one's awareness, however, he was also arguing for the use of unconventional means of learning to perceive the world and ourselves. In his well-known book *The Doors of Perception*, Huxley writes,

In a world where education is predominantly verbal, highly educated people find it all but impossible to pay serious attention to anything but words and notions....[In fact,] when it comes to finding out how you and I, our children and grandchildren, may become more perceptive, more intensely aware of inward and outward reality, more open to the spirit, less apt, by psychological malpractices, to make ourselves physically ill, more capable of controlling our own autonomic nervous system—when it comes to any form of non-verbal education more fundamental (and more likely to be of some practical use) than

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<sup>162</sup> Brantley, 96-99.

<sup>163</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963; Perennial Library, 1990), 74-75.

Swedish drill, no really respectable person in any really respectable university or church will do anything about it.<sup>164</sup>

I think there is more acceptance of unconventional methods of teaching in the academic world today, however; I feel that Huxley's problem is still one that needs to be addressed. I do not have an all-encompassing method of teaching using mindfulness, but I would like to make some general suggestions as to how one might use some of the practices mentioned in this paper.

As I have stated throughout, mindfulness cannot begin in the performance, it must be present during regular activities, including practicing one's instrument. The walking meditation and body-scan are particularly good practices in learning to be aware of one's physical sensations and reactions. One can practice long tones, scales, or passages of music in a very slow and mindful way, much like in the walking meditation. While one is playing the instrument, one can be mindful of the way the air feels moving through the body and into the instrument (on a wind instrument); how the lips, face and tongue feel; what the keys feel like under the fingers; and what kind of tension one might be holding in other parts of the body, for example. This practice is done extremely slowly, so that hardly any focus is needed to think about the notes or fingerings.

I have had my students do this exercise on a simple scale. I tell them to play a scale of their choice, to hold the notes for a relatively long duration (but without a specific pulse), and to just notice what their bodies feel like. One student reported that he could, for the first time, really feel his bottom teeth biting into his bottom lip as he played up the scale. The higher the pitches on the instrument, the more he noticed the pain of the biting. He had been told many times in the past that he was "biting too much," but had never actually felt it in such an obvious way. Another one of my students reported that he could feel that he was applying an excessive

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 76-77.

amount of pressure on the keys—far more than was necessary to close them—which made his fingers fatigue before the scale was finished. In my own experience, I once noticed that as I ran out of air, my right arm and hand became dramatically more tense, as if I was holding on to something tightly so that I might not lose it.

This exercise can also be done in passages of music, again at a very slow speed. Quite often, musicians hold tension in various parts of their bodies without being aware of it. Sometimes by playing a passage extremely slowly with mindfulness, these tensions are revealed. Similarly, certain passages in the music may trigger an automatic physical reaction that we do not feel. Playing passages in the higher octave might cause one's shoulder to move toward the head, or, certain interval leaps might be accompanied by changes in one's air speed, for example. All of these physical reactions can become automatic and go unnoticed by the musician until a problem arises.

Cognitive awareness is usually more subtle and difficult to achieve than physical awareness. I try to practice noticing any thoughts that occur while playing the instrument, and also noticing what relation the thoughts have to the music. Many times, thoughts arise that have no relation at all to the music and are simply distractions. Other times, thoughts are related to the music, but are still distracting. For example, one of my students recently played a very fast and technically demanding piece in his lesson. At one point in the music, he completely “messed up” a certain passage that I had heard him play correctly many times. I asked him what thoughts had occurred before and during the mistakes. He noted that he had used a different fingering than usual for one of the notes, and had been thinking “I should have used the other fingering.” Once he allowed himself to follow this thought, he lost focus on the next section, and then made mistakes because of this.

As mentioned earlier, the practice of mindfulness can lead a musician to realize his/her sense of self and attachment to ego. By being detached from one's ego and focused on the music, the performer has no room for self-talk or self-consciousness. One might be able to practice this sense of detachment from ego by using the techniques of "paradoxical intention," "dereflection," and "hyper-intention" cited by Viktor Frankl earlier in this chapter.

If a student is afraid of making mistakes in front of his peers, for example, he might try intentionally letting himself make mistakes while they are watching. By doing this, the student will be practicing detachment, and might find out that making mistakes in front of his peers is not that big of a deal after all.

Another example might be if a student that kept missing a high note tried intentionally to miss it. I have tried this with students, and it sometimes surprises me that they often hit the high note when they try to miss it. On the other hand, if they are unable to play the high note at all, they might try to "force" it to come out with no success. They soon realize that trying to make the note come out this way is usually unsuccessful.

These are only a few suggestions as to how mindfulness practice might fit into teaching. If one practices mindfulness in formal practice as well as in everyday activities, the possibilities of application are endless.

### **Conclusion**

In modern times, we rarely allow ourselves to experience each moment as it exists without judgment. Instead, we tend to go about our daily activities while thinking about many different things at once. We do this by conceptualizing our experiences to the point where we are unable to even accept the idea that each moment is new and unique. If we have tasted a certain food in the past and did not like it, we assume our dislike for this food is a fixed concept.



By conceptualizing all of our experience, and by refusing to view each moment anew, we are literally practicing being *out* of the moment. Our need for conceptualizing in certain situations is obvious; however, if we can practice being focused and undistracted during most of our daily activities we will see the potential for new experiences in everything we do, including musical performance.

Throughout the paper I have discussed the many ways in which anxiety can either help or hinder a performance. In stressful situations, our natural fight-or-flight mechanism is activated, thereby causing a chain of automatic cognitive and somatic reactions. The reactions are connected in such a way that one type of reaction can easily trigger another. If we allow ourselves to react automatically during performance, we run the risk of being out of touch with the moment and the music itself. However, if we can accept the feelings of anxiety and arousal and learn to work with them, we have a better chance of being connected to the music. We can choose whether or not to react and/or get attached to our anxiety. By learning to be aware and mindful of the present moment as it exists, and by learning to “respond” rather than react, we can better deal with anxiety in performance.

Creativity means being able to work with what exists in the moment of performance and to “bring something new into being.” This kind of creativity suggests a willingness to struggle with whatever happens during the performance—be it mistakes in the playing, the physical and mental symptoms of anxiety, or whatever else may arise. By developing mindfulness and awareness of our thoughts and sensations, and by not becoming attached to these distractions, we will be better able to focus on the music and cultivate creativity.

There have been many techniques associated with overcoming performance anxiety, and no one technique works for every person. What is interesting about mindfulness meditation is

that it addresses anxiety in all aspects of one's life, not just performing music. It is my feeling that by practicing mindfulness in our daily lives—in routine activities as well as in playing music—we will be better equipped to deal with the anxiety in any performance situation. Again, eliminating anxiety is not the goal—working with anxiety is what is important. Hopefully, one can learn to work with anxiety by practicing selflessness, awareness, and seeing moments in life with a beginner's mind. The practice of mindfulness can often bring about a simple shift in perspective, which can be the difference between feeling facilitated or debilitated by anxiety.

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## VITA

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