

THE FLOW STATE AND MUSIC PERFORMANCE

A guide for musicians

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Every musician has experienced at some stage deep feelings of exhilaration and freedom when immersed in playing their instrument. The act of playing the instrument feels easy, you feel confident and when you look at the clock you may discover that an hour has passed in an instant. This is what psychologists refer to as 'Flow'. It was first documented in a study by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in 1975 when he began to research rock climbers, basketballers, composers, dancers and chess players. He found that although these activities all differed from each other, the positive feelings of flow stimulated through these activities was reported to be very similar.

This article will introduce some of the theoretical background to the flow state and then provide techniques to consciously increase your ability to reach higher levels of flow feelings in practise and performance. These techniques can be applied in the teaching studio with students in secondary and tertiary level and beyond.

Csikszentmihalyi (1997) provided this definition of flow:

“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 of 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 of the experience are remarkably similar.”

Through his ongoing research Csikszentmihalyi isolated 7 elements of the flow experience: three characteristics of activities that promote flow and four experiential states reported whilst in flow.

Characteristics of the activity:

1. Clarity of goals and immediate feedback.
Feedback is not delayed like it is in everyday life. It is clear how well you are doing and it is clear what you need to do next.
2. A high degree of concentration on a limited field of stimuli.
In other words not trying to concentrate on too many things at once. Intruding stimuli must be kept out of the attention.
3. A balance between ability/skills and challenge.
'Flow' tends to occur when a person's skills are fully involved in overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable. Optimal experiences usually involve a fine balance between one's ability to act and the available opportunities for action. If challenges are too low relative to one's skills one gets relaxed and then bored. If challenges are too high one gets frustrated, then worried, and eventually anxious. If both challenges and skills are perceived to be low, then one feels apathetic. When high challenges are matched with high skills then the deep involvement of the flow state begins.

Experiential states (perception) or how you feel whilst in flow:

4. A sensation of heightened control.
You are in control without consciously controlling. You are also not worrying about losing control.
5. An effortlessness of action.
You are highly active but there is no strain.
6. An altered perception of time.
Your perception of time passing is altered so that you lose sense of its passage.
7. A melding together of action and awareness.
A person experiencing flow feelings has no dualistic perspective. You are aware of your actions but not of the awareness itself. You are highly aware but you are not self-conscious and you act with spontaneity.

Flow in practise.

To enable the state of flow to be brought on deliberately during performances and for musicians to have the control of their mind state, they need to learn to practice with flow techniques. The Flow Music Method (FMM), devised by Eve Newsome to encourage flow feelings in musicians, draws primarily on the general flow research of Csikszentmihalyi and the practical teaching work of Andreas Burzik, a psychologist and violinist from Bremen.

The Flow warm-up.

The way to begin to experience flow feelings is with the Flow warm-up. This can be done at the start of every practise session and before every performance. The principles of the Flow warm-up are based around awareness of the elements of touch, ease, sound (TES) and body-integrated movement.

Touch:

The body takes in information. This is the starting point in terms of accessing the positive feelings of flow. You can begin by identifying the sound-producing contact points. For example, on the oboe and bassoon these contact points are:

1. The pads of all the fingers and the pads of the thumbs that operate key work.
2. The lips where they meet the mouthpiece
3. The tongue where it meets the reed
4. The airstream where it meets the mouthpiece

Start by playing slow, easy notes at a comfortable dynamic level and concentrate on feeling the contact of the pads of your fingers with the instrument. Just play any notes you like. It does not have to be a piece you know, you can just make something simple up. Just make sure that what you play is something easy and is at a comfortable tempo and dynamic. Avoid playing scales, set repertoire or challenging work at this point as that will create too many demands on you when you are concentrating on the contact points. Whilst playing your easy notes at an easy tempo and comfortable dynamic you will notice that there is a lot to feel, such as the shape of the keys, the coolness or warmth of the keys, the vibration of the instrument and the physical sensation. Slow down so that you can really feel every note and the subtle differences between notes. It is a deeply sensual experience. When you are ready, begin to feel the contact

of your lips with the mouthpiece. Again there is something to feel, there is information to be absorbed on a subtle feeling level for each note when you go slowly enough to really feel in a deep way. Keep playing easy notes at a comfortable level. As you continue you can begin to be more aware of the contact points of the tongue with the reed and air stream with the reed. It is advisable to start with the contact points that are easiest to feel, such as the fingers, and when they feel more sensitised move on to the contact points that are more subtle such as where the tongue and air meet the reed. For example, on the piano you can start with one hand at a time and then add in each foot really noticing where your feet contact the pedals. As you add in more contact points you may need to slow down so that you can still feel at a deep level whilst concentrating on the specific points.

Movement and body-integrated learning:

The body absorbs information best when it is acting in a body-integrated or whole body way. In terms of flow for musicians, this means that if we begin to gently move in a body-integrated way as we play, we can respond more easily to the sensory information we are gathering through the contact experience. We can therefore learn more efficiently and retain the sensorimotor information in our bodies so that it can be released at will whilst performing.

While you play, find a relaxing whole-body movement that can be continued with minimal effort. Generally it is better to keep your feet on the ground so that you are in a stable position. If you are unsure how to begin, find a gentle swaying movement. Your instrument should be included in the movement so that you begin to feel like you are ‘dancing’ with it. If you are sitting make sure that you feel comfortable and that you can move your upper body in an harmonious way. It is important that you keep moving because a static or frozen position can bring about a rigid feeling, anxiousness and too much thinking. When you move in a body-integrated manner, you can feel the music in your body and anxiousness and worries tend to naturally dissipate.

Ease:

This is a crucial part of the flow experience. Continue to play slow, easy notes and feel the contact points. Keep an easy body movement going as you play. Ask yourself the questions such as: ‘Am I really comfortable?’, ‘Does the feeling of contact feel easy?’, ‘Can I really feel every note and is the feeling deeply relaxing?’ and ‘What is the quality of the feeling?’

Sound:

As you feel the contact, gently move your body and become aware of the quality of ease in your playing, you can then begin to address the quality of sound. You may have already noticed that your sound has changed as you have become more focussed on the sensory experience and the ease of your playing. Now, as you continue to play easy notes, listen to your sound. Ask yourself questions such as , ‘Can I hear my overtones?’, ‘Do I enjoy my sound?’, ‘Can I feel the texture of my sound?’, ‘What can I hear?’

The Flow warm-up consists of going around the cycle of Touch/Ease/Sound and increasing your awareness as you become more subtly attuned to your instrument. It is important to keep your body gently moving so that the body can absorb information for you. The instrument gives you all the information you need and as you become more aware of the sensory nature of your playing and you are deeply concentrating on your sensory experience, you will begin to naturally fall into the positive feelings of flow.

Flow with repertoire

Many musicians want to know how they can learn repertoire more efficiently and with a higher level of quality. Orchestral players in particular have large amounts of repertoire to learn in short time frames.

Once you have become comfortable with the Flow warm-up you can begin to look at repertoire using the same principles of Touch/Ease/Sound and body-integrated movement. In the Flow warm-up you will have been improvising, just playing any easy notes you liked at a slow tempo and a comfortable dynamic. You may have noticed that your body knew which notes to play and you were improvising with simple notes and patterns. When you use flow techniques with repertoire, the concept of exploration or improvisation is also very important. This way you can maintain an attitude of playfulness as you explore your pieces.

There are 3 main ways of using the principles of Flow with repertoire.

1. Begin to play through your repertoire. When you notice a lack of ease or a sense of frustration, slow down and explore the relevant challenge. Use the principles of Touch/Ease/Sound and body-integrated movement to reduce the challenge and increase your skills through gathering sensory information. Play through again. Repeat this process as necessary allowing for a deeper experience of Touch/Ease/Sound each time. Remember to use flexible rhythm and tempo and avoid mechanistic practise. You can change the dynamics and articulation to find a greater comfort level. Later you can re-integrate them whilst maintaining the comfort level. Remember that fast playing comes out of practise that is slow enough to integrate through awareness all the information of each note.
2. Begin to play and while you are playing through start exploring, improvising and adjusting for Touch/Ease/Sound. You do not have to stop and you do not have to play through sections again. You just keep adjusting as you go along, checking that you have an easy, comfortable feeling at the contact points and an enjoyment of your sound. Make sure you keep moving your body in a body-integrated manner. Just keep on playing and exploring as you go!
3. Create a rhythmic loop based around the specific element in the repertoire that needs attention. Keep repeating it while adjusting for Touch/Ease/Sound and any other elements such as intonation. If necessary reduce the technical challenge. This rhythmic loop is for assisting to reduce the challenge level and build the skill level up on specific issues that you have identified.

Flow in Performance.

Practising with flow techniques greatly increases your ability to bring on joyful and engaging flow feelings in performances. If you are in performance and start to feel a lack of ease, experience anxiety, too much thinking or judging or hear that your playing is not at the standard you would desire, immediately put into practise the principles of flow. Feel your instrument, get more comfortable, enjoy your sound quality and 'dance' with your instrument. Become actively engaged and absorbed in the inherently sensual experience of your own playing, then you will experience the exhilaration of the world of flow. Just 'go with the Flow'!