

Flow and Musical Performance – A Personal Perspective
By Susan Clarke

My mother and I had a typically difficult and complex relationship during my teens. We were, in many ways, too much alike to live peacefully in the same house, both of us committed to being right with violent tempers thrown into the mix. Our fights were verbally and occasionally physically violent. She was also my high school music teacher and had been a fine violinist. One day as I was looking through the filing cabinet for some new music to play I found the battered piano accompaniment to "Czardas" by Victor Monti. It had all my favourite musical elements – a minor key, passionately free phrases, drama and excitement. Over a number of weeks I spent many hours perfecting the piano part. One day my mother came downstairs and got out her violin to play with me. She didn't play very often because, like many violinists, she had an injured shoulder, but for nearly two hours we played together, the time never registering on our thoughts. As the musical lines wove together and as our interpretations of the music began to blend, our individual selves disappeared until finally, all that was left was the music, its energy and passion. For a short time our hurts, anger and resentments disappeared because the music had created a harmonious space for us to co-exist.

The timelessness, effortless and lack of self-consciousness we experienced were what the psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihaly would describe as being in flow and what many sportspeople would describe as being "in the zone". He describes flow as a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else matters: the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer joy of doing it.

Flow can be experienced in many situations. I have experienced it alone on a mountain-top at sunset; looking out over a green valley with a meandering river; in a classroom as a student when the participants in a discussion were all totally engrossed in learning and sharing their experiences; in a meditation where I lost myself and felt at one with everything around me; and swimming laps in a pool, my body in perfect harmony with the water, the swimming so effortless that I felt I could have gone on forever. The experience of flow is what draws us to the activities we love.

Csikszentmihalyi says that the best moments in our lives usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. The most profound implication of this work as far as I'm concerned, is that we have the capacity to make flow and optimal experience happen, making fulfillment and happiness possible for all of us.

Csikszentmihalyi developed his theory on flow and the psychology of happiness by studying the experiences of around 100,000 people in a remarkably diverse range of activities over the globe, including sports people, artists, musicians, goat-herders in the Alps and factory workers. One of the workers interviewed described how he set himself goals to increase his productivity and to make his part of the manufacturing process as perfect as he could. Setting these goals challenged him to find better and more efficient ways to do his job. As he developed and grew, he set himself goals beyond his job and used those to keep him going when times were hard. He described his intense feelings of satisfaction at the end of each day and how the time seemed to fly in spite of the humdrum reality of his work. His happiness came from the way he chose to interpret his work, not on the external circumstances of his life.

Viktor Frankl, psychologist and holocaust survivor, said "Don't aim at success - the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success like happiness cannot be pursued, it must ensue... as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a course greater than oneself." For my mother and I on that magical day, the course greater than ourselves, was the music and to achieve flow we had to work together to achieve that single greater purpose, obliterating our conflicts in the process. To experience flow, we have to make the music central to our experience and not allow ourselves to get in the way.

I experienced the antithesis of a flow experience at the senior recital for my performance degree. I was performing the Britten "Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings" with my teacher conducting. I came out on to the stage and tuned my instrument and then stood quietly waiting to begin. The French horn was supposed to start. My mind and heart were racing and I felt completely paralyzed with fear, a voice in my head continuously whispering "I can't do this". I almost walked offstage and then talked myself into staying over and over again, or so it seemed. The silence was deafening and all eyes were on me waiting for me to begin. It seemed like an eternity had passed, when in fact it would only have been a minute. Summoning all my courage I began, missing the first high G, then the next. By the end of the Prologue I had regained my composure and kept going. I went through twenty minutes of pure hell as I played my piece to the end. It wasn't quite the disaster I had thought it was, but it certainly wasn't an experience in flow because in Frankl's words I was aiming at success, and my success was the focus of the performance instead of the music.

As a student of conducting I faced the same kind of problem. At a rehearsal I was conducting as a university student I became frozen, my movements were stiff and awkward, the ensemble kept slowing down and I was becoming increasingly frustrated and upset. In the analysis, I had but I had become overly concerned with my own performance as a conductor and got in the way of my true purpose, which was to work with the players to perform a piece of music. To overcome this problem my

conducting skills had to become automatic, freeing me to focus on the music and not myself when I was on the podium. Only then, could I experience flow.

After reading Csikszentmihaly's work I decided to experiment with the idea of making flow an explicit goal for my ensembles. Most of us have experienced flow in some way and are able to describe the way it feels. We discuss how this might be achieved in musical performance and the individual's responsibility involved. The goal for each performance is to have a great time expressing the music and the feelings of exhilaration experienced in flow. This approach has resulted in a transformation of the way I rehearse and the way my ensembles perform because we are focused on making beautiful music rather than a perfect performance. My students understand that the purpose of practice is to achieve the technical mastery that will allow them to experience flow in performance, developing intrinsic motivation in the process. There is less anxiety and more joy, which is what playing music should be all about.

Flow is the glue that binds us to the things we love to do - musicians to music, actors to acting, painters to painting, runners to running. It provides the key to intrinsic motivation, and it gives us time out from the judgment, striving and anxiety that diminishes the quality of our experiences in art and in life.

References

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