

In Search Of

The “Perfect” Musical Performance

By Paola Savvidou, NCTM

One of the privileges musicians living in modern times have is access to pristine, note-perfect recordings. While the ability to hear great pianists of our time in our living room grants us wonderful musical experiences, it comes at a cost: the illusion that such perfection can exist on the concert stage. I spent my entire childhood and some of my adult life thinking that if it wasn't perfect, it wasn't worth listening to. Imagine my disappointment walking off stage countless times and recounting the inevitable mistakes and the resulting moments of self-doubt. But I know I'm not alone. Other musicians of all ages and levels of ability struggle with this very same self-imposed condition: paralyzing perfectionism. I

have been blessed in my academic life as a student with teachers who had the right priorities for their students' growth: authenticity, fierce devotion to the music and self-trust. But somehow, in spite of the wonderful guidance and support, I kept getting in my own way. I had to find my way to my own musicianship and my own self-trust. In this article I will explore how we can re-direct our intent as teachers and performers to strive for excellence instead of perfection.

It's All There

The beautiful thing about making music is, fundamentally, music is already in our body. We experience rhythm and flow in our daily movements, we speak rhythmically and melodiously, and we feel harmonic tension and release in our gut. Over time, the entire spectrum of our experiences gives us the maturity and emotional capacity to comprehend musical meaning. All we have to do is let the ego, or the “internal judge” as Eloise Ristad so perceptively words it, go and allow for the magical connection between sound, body and emotions to synergistically create music.¹ Knowing music already exists in our body opens the door to self-trust and authenticity.

Recently, I had the honor of sharing a meal with Eugene Watts, trombonist

and co-founder of the world-famous Canadian Brass. This group has toured the world, at one point performing some 200 concerts per year. Now retired from the group, Watts occasionally gives talks and clinics on the topic of effortless performance. His calm and centered presence made me feel at ease. Naturally, our conversation revolved around the topic of performance, audience interaction and practicing. I would like to share some of his wisdom about performing that resonated with me as a performer and as a teacher.

“Don't practice; perform the sound.”

For musicians, the idea of not practicing is absurd. As I pondered Watts's statement, I tried to understand the difference between practicing and performing. We consider practicing as something we do when no one is watching, in the privacy of our home or studio. The problem with the practice mentality is it fosters a lower level of awareness than performance. We focus on the music, we think about the sound, carefully choose fingers, fight with the tempo, make decisions, change our mind, fail and try again.

But what if we were to look at practicing with a different light? Look at it more as the practice of

Paola Savvidou,
NCTM, is assistant professor of piano pedagogy at the University of Missouri. An advocate of developing healthful and expressive piano technique through movement and yoga, she is also a member of the New Muse Piano Duo.



performance and bring the same kind of energy and intent as we would if we were performing. Could this accelerate our progress? Or we would get the music “under our fingers” more effectively because we exaggerated the gestures and committed to our musical choices sooner?

“See with your ears.”

I saw Watts coaching a student group performing Brahms’s *Piano Trio, Op. 87*. The young musicians were very well prepared, and did all the right things. However, they were playing as three different musicians, not as a single unified group. One of his suggestions to them was to expand their awareness. See not only with their eyes, but with their ears. This mysterious visual refers to maintaining an open awareness. If there’s no sensitivity toward how the other musicians in the group might shape or move through a phrase, the piece will lack vitality. We sometimes are so focused on ourselves, what others think of us and playing the right notes, we forget to listen and connect our intuitive musical responses with others.

There’s an apt term for this type of spatial awareness in the dance world: psychological kinesphere. This term was coined by Rudolf von Laban who developed a system for analyzing human movement called Laban Movement Analysis.² The term refers to how far we are projecting our energy when we are speaking, or just plain walking down the street.

Psychological kinesphere can be separated in three levels: short-reach, mid-reach and far-reach. In short-reach psychological kinesphere, we project only to our immediate bubble surrounding us. Such a state can exist when we are having an intimate conversation with a friend. In mid-reach kinesphere, we project to a classroom, or perhaps the closest rows in a performance hall. In far-reach

kinesphere, we are connecting with as big a space as an entire city, state or even country. This is not to say we could actually have the capacity to physically project to such a big space, but psychologically, our awareness is much bigger.

In addition to the psychological kinesphere, Laban defined the physical kinesphere: the immediate physical space closest to our body (short-reach), the space we can comfortably reach when we extend our arms and legs (mid-reach), and the area just outside our comfortable range of movement that we have to extend and stretch, without walking, to get to (far-reach).

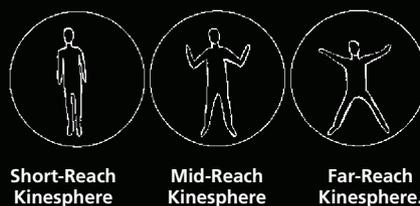


Diagram 1: Short-, Mid- and Far-Reach Kinesphere.

I often utilize these concepts in my teaching and watch the student’s gradual transformation from a timid interpretation to an open and confident performance. I start by asking students to perform for themselves, then for me, then their parents who are at home and finally for a friend who lives far away. This explores the idea of expanding psychological kinesphere. If the friend who is too far away to hear had the ability to somehow see the student perform in my studio the student would have to make all the gestures very big and try to show the music physically too. The use of this type of imagery explores both the physical kinesphere and psychological kinesphere; expanding mental awareness and physical gestures.

“Plunge into the unknown.”

The moment we walk on stage our audience makes immediate judgments about who we are and what our performance is going to be like. That puts an enormous amount of pressure on us to be the best we can be without coming across as fake, but rather as authentic and confident. The experience of a live performance is a double-edge sword. On one hand we have the confidence that we’ve spent countless hours practicing, so we know the music; while on the other hand, each performance is different. This sense of the unknown can be terrifying, especially for the perfectionists among us who like to be in control. Diving right into the performance allows the body and intuition to take over. Thinking about the anxiety as excitement for sharing the music has allowed me to face the stage spotlight with a fresh perspective and a new set of eyes—or ears, should I say?

In her TED talk entitled “Your Body Language Shapes Who You Are,” Amy Cuddy, professor and researcher at the Harvard Business School, explains her work on how body language affects not only what we communicate to others, but also how we perceive ourselves.³ She investigated whether “power poses,” for example, poses that expand the body by holding the arms out and the head up, can make a difference. A remarkable outcome of her study was that “when you pretend to be powerful, you actually feel more powerful.” Powerful is defined as feeling more optimistic and confident; essential qualities for a successful musical performance. Holding such open and strong positions for just two minutes prior to a performance releases the hormones testosterone and cortisol that promote a low stress reaction and a higher level of confidence. According to Cuddy, such a small change can bring about

big differences in terms of allowing the individual to perform with confidence and authenticity when they are under a stressful situation.

“Stay in the moment.”

Over the years of practicing yoga, I have come to realize just how much, as a society, we tend to live in the future. Our mind is constantly preoccupied with to-do lists, daily commitments, plans and the next thing we need to accomplish. Such clutter is the enemy of musical performance.

It’s normal for negative thoughts to attack the mind during a performance. We are taught to be self-critical. However, a performance is not the time and place for these thoughts. We are better served if the internal dialogue takes a rest for the duration of the performance. Re-directing our attention to the present moment, letting go of the past and the future, allows us to stay alert, open and engaged. Being in the moment facilitates a state of “flow.” That’s when the task at hand (that is, managing the unknown of the performance), our skills (the endless hours of practicing) and the level of anxiety, can be in balance with each other.⁴

“Strive for excellence, not perfection.”

Thinking I can perform without mistakes feels like putting on a restraining jacket: my mental state is vigilant and judgmental, and my body feels tense. The very thing that I am trying to control has seized control over me. I start to focus on all the wrong things: what others think of my playing, how many wrong notes have I played, did I miscount? Letting go of control allows me to focus on the essence of the music that I’m trying to communicate. I focus on the gesture and the story I’m trying to tell.

Gerald Klickstein defines excellence as the composite result of seven habits: ease of physical performance; practicing with imagination and expression; practicing with focus so as not to develop habits of inaccuracy; performing with rhythmic vitality; creating a rich, full tone; staying focused; and bringing a positive attitude to the performance.⁵ If we can focus on these elements during the hours of practicing, we shift our attention toward the elements of music making that matter the most to our audience: rhythmic vitality, expression, communication and artistry. Mistakes will happen. We can choose whether we embrace them or allow them to take over. My very wise piano duo partner has taught me: “If you are going to make mistakes, make them bold!” If I’m setting up myself for the perfect performance, I am setting myself up to fail before I have even played a note.

In the book *Musical Excellence*, Roger Chaffin and Anthony Lemieux discuss what it takes for one to succeed on the “road to Carnegie Hall.” They identify the commonly accepted 10-year rule of effective practicing as well as innate talent, as two necessary components for musical success. Innate talent comes through as the ability of the individual to have an “artistic image” of the musical shape of the piece. This ability, emphasized by the great master Neuhaus in his book *The Art of Piano Playing*, trumps many hours of mindless repetition.⁶ I couldn’t agree more with the Chaffin and Lemieux that musicians who practice effectively are able to remain concentrated during their practice, set goals they can meet, use practice strategies with flexibility, keep track of the big picture while practicing details, and effectively evaluate themselves and their progress.

Postlude

As music teachers, we hold the privilege of facilitating our students’ search for their own unique voice. We guide them to trust their musical intuition. By inviting open awareness and having an enthusiastic approach toward a performance, we empower our students for better outcomes. The greatest thing we can do for our students, in my opinion, is to reinforce that their musical self already exists. All we are trying to do is to create a safe place for them to experiment, explore, own and connect with their humanity. By embracing the fact that perfection is an illusion, we can get out of our own way and focus on communicating the music. Through each performance we change. We absorb the new experience and learn from it. Each performance is a step toward excellence. ♪

Notes

1. Ristad, Eloise, *A Soprano on her Head: Right-Side-Up Reflections on Life and Other Performances*. (Moab, UT: Real People Press, 1982): 13.
2. Hackney, Peggy, *Making Connections*. (New York: Routledge, 2002): 223.
3. Cuddy, Amy, “Your Body Language Shapes who you are,” TED video, 20:59, filmed June 2012, http://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are.html
4. Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1990).
5. Klickstein, Gerald, *The Musician’s Way: A Guide to Practice, Performance, and Wellness*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009): 22–23.
6. Chaffin, Roger and Anthony F. Lemieux, “General Perspectives on achieving musical Excellence,” *Musical Excellence*, edited by Aaron Williamon. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004): 19–39.