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## **Ironic Processes of Mental Control: Implications for Musicians**

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Musicians have to overcome numerous psychological obstacles in order to perform at a high level of artistry. Many experience some level of discomfort associated with negative emotions and distracting thoughts that detract from the performance. They want to stop worrying and concentrate in a performance, but their attempts at this mental control may result in dwelling on the exact thought that they want to avoid. Rather than attaining their goal, they end up acting in ways that are opposite to what is desired. In the field of experimental psychology, this paradox is known as ironic processes of mental control.

In 1994, Daniel Wegner developed his theory of ironic processes of mental control to explain the challenges of dealing with unwanted thoughts. According to Wegner, mental control is performed through two processes: 1) the operating process and 2) the monitoring process. The operating process initiates an action towards a goal; whereas the monitoring process checks and evaluates its effectiveness, and directs the operating process to areas that need adjustments. The monitoring process only exists at the subconscious level. It is passive and cannot be interrupted. If the monitoring process propels unwanted thoughts into consciousness, mental control will stop. This is when it increases the accessibility of feelings and thoughts that should be ignored. Wegner labeled this paradox as ironic "rebound effect."

Problems arise when mental load increases. When people are stressed out, nervous, tired, or distracted, they experience a stronger ironic rebound because the increase in mental load reduces the attentional resources available to the operating process needed for mental control. When the attentional span narrows, the monitoring process works against itself by focusing on thoughts that are irrelevant or undesirable. This phenomenon explains why intentional relaxation, imagery, and self-talk are not always useful in coping with anxiety in a performance setting.

The purpose of this study is threefold: 1) to survey Daniel Wegner's ironic processes of mental control; 2) to discuss how the theory has been applied to sports, and how it can be applied to music performance; and 3) to offer recommendations for effectively countering ironic processes. Several suggestions for further research will be proposed.

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