

Master your inner game
and
maximize your performance



Master thesis

By
Benedicte A Aarsland

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Master of Music
Strings
Sibelius Academy
Helsinki

ABSTRACT

This essay is about the mental aspects of being a performer. To be a peak performer, you need technical and musical skills. However, you also need a strong and trained mind. You need to know how to focus your mind to the maximum. I will write about the “inner game”; how our mind is working during preparation time and during pressure. The goal is to be able to control your thoughts, so that they help you, instead of destroy you. I want to give you some ideas of how to understand the mental aspects of a performance. Your performance depends on mental understanding, preparation and training, in addition to instrumental practicing. This knowledge can support you to become a more confident player, and to make performing more enjoyable for yourself and others.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this essay I will be looking at some aspects of music performance, which can be helpful for improving your performance. I will focus on the process of becoming the best mental and emotional artist you can be. I will look at the mental aspects of learning, and performing music. I chose to call this mental aspect for the inner game, which is a known phenomenon in the world of sport. The sport world has a lot of research and focus on the mental aspects of peak performance, and we can transfer almost everything over to the world of music performance. As musically gifted you might be, performing music is also about mastery of the self, of what's inside you.

2. THE INNER GAME

Every game is composed of two parts, an outer game and an inner game. The outer game is played against an opponent to overcome external obstacles. The inner game takes place inside the mind of the player. Here the obstacles often are nerves, self-doubt and loss of concentration. We often wonder why we play so poorly one day, and so well the other day. And why do we clutch during an audition, when we have played the piece so well a hundred of times earlier? The key of succeeding is not only in the amount of practicing-hours you've put behind you, but also about your skill to master the inner game, to control the art of relaxed concentration, and to discover a true basis for self-confidence. One of the keys to success lies in not trying too hard. We all want to aim at a spontaneous performance, which is only possible when the mind is calm and at one with the body. To get in this state of mind, one needs confidence. But how can one be confident, and how does one achieve a relaxed and concentrated mind?

Many musicians and athletes know that the goal is to be on stage with a relaxed and empty mind. But how can we make sure to get in in this state of mind. What do we do when we recognize being nervous, and not able to focus our thoughts? As students, our heads are filled with information about how to play and how not to play. In many cases, too much information is worse than none. Images are often better than words, and showing is better than telling. Too much instruction can make us try hard, which makes us tense. And a tensed body can not create a free and beautiful sound, and create spontaneous music. So how can we achieve an empty mind? How do we play "out of our mind"?

The best performances are usually when the mind is not disturbed by any thoughts whatsoever. Peak performances never come when you are thinking of it. To play unconsciously does not mean to play without consciousness. But it means that your mind is not giving you any instructions of what to do, and what not to do. You are not thinking of how to hold your bow, or what fingering to use. You are not thinking how well that last passage went, or who is sitting on that second row. Your mind knows what to do unconsciously, and the goal is to trust your body and mind, so you can get close to the free state of mind. But how can you be consciously «unconscious?» You want to be so focused on what you are doing, that your mind is completely still. Your mind is one with what the body is doing, and the unconscious and automatic functions are working with no interruptions from your thoughts.¹

2.1 To achieve a still mind

When you are concentrated to the maximum, there are no thoughts of how well you are doing, how you almost missed that shift, or what bowing comes next. It just flows. When you are in this state of concentration, you are really into the game, and can enjoy making music and performing on stage. You become at one with the instrument, yourself and the music. In Timothy Gallwey's book "The Inner Game of Tennis" he is talking about two "Inner selves". Self 1 is the "teller" and Self 2 is the "doer". One of the biggest keys to achieve a still mind is to make Self 1 trust Self 2. Even though the Self 2, the unconscious, automatic self, is extremely competent, we tend to not trust it. It is not easy to let go of our control. By thinking too much and trying too hard, Self 1 often produces tension and muscle conflicts in the body. Harmony between the two selves exists only when the mind itself is quiet and confident.

Another key to achieve a still mind is to learn to play non-judgmentally. This is challenging, because we spend so much of our practicing time criticizing our playing. How else do we get better? We have to be able to switch off this criticism-voice, when we are performing. We want to get in another state of mind on stage, then when we are in the practicing-room. When working with professors before a concert, they can be picking on details in your playing. But then straight before you enter stage they often say: "Now forget everything I've just said." That is easier said, than done.

When you are getting close to a concert, audition or competition, you should play your pieces through, like it was now or never, at least once every day. Do not focus on which

¹ In Gallwey (1986) The inner game of tennis.

shifts failed, and what run didn't go quite as you wished, but focus on your mind. Simulate a concert situation, with audience or jury, and train your mind in this situation, regularly! We tend to prioritize technical aspect, and forget about the mental part, which is just as important. Just look at the athletes! They have their own psychologist on the team with them every single day close to competition day. We have a lot to learn from the sports world.

In the practicing room one should not only work on details, but also simulate a performance situation. You should play through the piece, and try to keep your thoughts and corrections off. Suzuki, a renowned Zen master, describes the effects of the ego-mind like this: "As soon as we reflect, deliberate, and conceptualize, the original unconsciousness is lost and a thought interferes. The arrow is off the string but does not fly straight to the target, nor does the target stand where it is. Calculation, which is miscalculation, sets in. Man is a thinking reed but his great works are done when he is not calculating and thinking. "Childlikeness" has to be restored with long years of training in self-forgetfulness." When we are in a quiet state of mind, we are "in the groove" we feel spontaneous and alert. We also have an inner assurance that we can do what needs to be done, without having to try hard. We trust ourselves, and simply know that it will come.

If you get in the right groove, you don't feel like taking credit, but rather you feel fortunate and graced. To get in this state of mind, I find it helpful to expand the horizon as much as possible; to not focus on my own performance and my own skills, but to put the music and the composer in focus. Then I feel less pressure, and I naturally become more calm. However, it takes time to learn the skill of letting go the human inclination to judge ourselves and our performance as either good or bad. Letting go of self-judgement is another important key in the inner game. The moment you start to judge something as good or bad, your mind is not still anymore. In addition your body is getting tight and tensed with trying².

The key is to direct one hundred percent of your attention to expression. When your concentration is not going in a multiple directions it's amazing what you can accomplish. You don't have to worry about how somebody played a piece in this or that recording, and you don't have to worry about "technical rules." The only thing you think about is what you want to say with the music, to this precise audience. If you manage this, you will be amazed at how your technique will improve, how free your sound is, and how impulsive you play. You gain a

² In Gallwey (1986) *The inner game of tennis*

much subtler control over the nuances of intonation and sound, because you are relaxed, free and without fear. The insistence on focus is incredibly beneficial because you will be able clear the mind of all the informational noise that could distract you from your musical goals.

Most students go to master class after master class and collect a huge amount of information, often conflicting, and can easily get overwhelmed and confused by what they've heard. The best thing you can do is concentrate on your own problems because, in the end, it is you who must solve them through mindful practicing. But letting go of judgments does not mean ignoring errors. It simply means seeing events as they are and not adding anything to them, like emotions. You want to have a nonjudgmental awareness, because judgmental thoughts usually lead to emotional reactions and then to tightness, trying too hard and self-condemnation.

The errors we make should be seen as an important part of the developing process. We learn a great deal from our errors. The first step is to see your playing as it is. This can be done only when personal judgment is absent. As soon your playing and technique are seen clearly and accepted, a natural and effective process of change can begin. It is not enough to hear from your teacher that your shoulders are high, or that you bow arm is tensed. The moment you see it yourself, and realize the effect of it, you are much more likely to be able to change your technique faster. This is why the use of mirrors in the practicing-rooms, and sound and video recordings are essential for your development.³

2.2 The judgemental mind

The judgmental mind is complex. Phrases like “you are your own best critic” and “you become what you think” are well known. Most of us know that negative thinking does not get us far, and holds us back. What about positive thinking? Looking from a perspective where having a still and quiet mind is the goal, positive thinking can be just as crucial as negative thinking. Why? Compliments engage the judgmental mind. Self 1, the ego-mind, is starting to act as soon as compliments, or critics, are given.

The ego-mind is always looking for approval and wanting to avoid disapproval. It actually sees a compliment as a potential criticism. If your professor is pleased with one kind of

³ In Kageyama, www.bulletproofmusician.com

version, he will be displeased by the opposite. "If he or she likes me for doing well, he will dislike me for not doing well." The standard of good and bad had been established, and the result is less concentration and ego-interference. When giving positive feedback, one should focus on reinforcing those things that a student has control over. Their actions, behaviors, choices, strategies, approach, effort, thought process, and so on. Specific, concrete things they can act upon. It is important to praise the behavior and not the person. From our early years as children, we are seeking for acceptance. But it is important to know that when we praise a child's successes, the underlying message they can receive is that we value them when they succeed – but if they fail, our love and respect for them goes down. This puts the child in a tough place, where they constantly have to seek out and live up to others' expectations, in order to feel like they are worth something.⁴

The work of accomplishing self-confidence starts early. To reach a true self-confidence, you need to have trust between self-1 and self-2, "the teller" and "the doer". As long as Self 1 is ignorant of the true capabilities of Self 2, he is likely to mistrust it. It is the mistrust of Self 2 which causes both the interference called "trying too hard" and too much self-instruction. The first results in using too many muscles, the second in mental distraction and lack of concentration. You have to trust in the competence of your body and its brain, and you have to let it play the music. Self 1 stays out of it. But though this is very simple, it does not mean that it is easy.

To Self 2, a picture is worth more than a thousand words. This is why it is important for students to go to concerts and watch videos of good musicians. Words were not learned by Self 2 until several years after birth. The native tongue of Self 2 is imagery: sensory images. Movements are learned through visual images and feeling. The primary role of Self 1 is to set goals for Self 2, then to let Self 2 perform. Self 1 has to trust in self 2 and the body's capacity, and not try to control it. It is an art of its own to surrender Self 1's control and to let the body play.⁵

It is important to experience the difference of making it happen and letting it happen. To experience the difference is to know the difference. How do we just let go of our judgement? How do we stop our thoughts from wandering? Even if you are fully convinced of the value

⁴ In Gallway (1986) *The inner game of tennis*

⁵ In Gallway (1986) *The inner game of tennis*

and effects of stilling the mind, it doesn't yet mean that you are able to accomplish it. The quiet mind cannot be achieved by understanding. You also need experience. Very gradually one begins to trust the natural processes which occur when the mind is less and less active.

Learning the skill of meditation can be an effective tool to increase your ability to quiet the mind, to focus and to let go. Very gradually one begins to trust the natural processes which occur when the mind is less and less active. This process is not easy, and it takes time to develop these skills. It is not enough to know the facts, it's crucial to have experience as well. A clear understanding of the problem is the first step. The next steps are practical demonstrations and practicing the process of letting go. Ultimately the mind cannot be controlled by the mere act of letting go, only by a simply passive process. Make sure to play as many concerts as you can, create fake auditions and play for your friends, regularly. This can be more effective than weeks of practicing only.

3. MENTAL PREPARATION

I will now write about some exercises and techniques, created in the sports world, to help you train your inner mind. One important trick is to put the mind somewhere. The secret is where you put your focus. Put your focus to the present moment, on the dynamics and articulation, on the emotions and character, on your deep breathing and your colleagues. But how do you maintain concentration for long periods of time? On this subject something can be learned from yoga and meditation. Bhakti yoga for example is a yoga that aims at achieving perfect concentration of mind through devotion, and in overcoming the distraction of mind. Bhakti yoga teaches that love of the object of concentration makes it possible to focus and eventually to become one with that object. Love the music you are playing, and become one with your instrument. Concentration is not thinking hard about something. And it is not trying hard to concentrate. Instead it is fascination of mind. When there is love present, the mind is drawn irresistibly toward the object of love. It is effortless and relaxed, not tense and purposeful. You enter a relaxed and effortless concentration. A peak performance on Wimbledon demands the same inner game skills as a peak performance in Wigmore Hall. This is why I am using the sport psychology as inspiration for this essay. Sport psychologists have many advanced exercises for training your inner game.⁶

⁶ In Kageyama, www.bulletproofmusician.com

3.1 'The spot'

The first step can be to find your very own «Spot», where you can not be disturbed for at least 30 minutes, and where you feel comfortable. This «Spot» you are only going to use when you are mentally training. Your time in your spot is intended to help you take more control over your thoughts and images so that you can use them to master your inner game for peak performance. Imagery is one essential technique. Imagery can be built around actual past occurrences, or events you create entirely in your mind. Some athletes rely heavily on scenes from past successes to build confidence. Others mentally view themselves playing that next game or running in an Olympic event many years down the road. The goal is to make the images as rich and intense as you can. Once you have found your spot, learn how to use it constructively. Establish the regularity of it by making sure you go there daily. Recall your last competition/audition, and/or think about your next one. ⁷

Think over your last practice session. Plan your next one. Go over your last lesson. But don't daydream, and don't stay in your spot for too long. Your time at your Spot is intended to help you make control over your images so that you can use them to master your inner game for peak performance. Stay in your Spot for 20-30 minutes. Sport psychologists focus on the importance of finding your own combination of self-knowledge and mental preparation for yourself, to maximize performance. You have to look closely to your own challenges and triumphs, instead of just following some prototype exercise. It is a process of finding your performance keys- the keys of mastering your inner game. It's all inside you, the goal is to find your images and thoughts that gives you power and confidence, and to know exactly how to use them. There is a power that can be released from inside of you, if you use experiences and images that you hold within. That power, used in the service of mastering your inner game, is potentially far greater than what is usually accomplished by applying external techniques or ideas from others, from outside yourself. Every person is different, so naturally every person needs different inputs and techniques.

The next step after finding your very own Spot could be an exercise that involves finding the people in your life, which have affected how you play your sport/music. People who taught you much about who you are as well as how you think, feel, and act. These aspects of who you are, within your universe of people close to you, strongly determine how you

⁷ In Kauss (2001) *Mastering your inner game*

compete/perform. Next to people, the greatest source of influence is your memories of life experiences you hold within you. Identify what you consider your best performance ever, where you remember having the sense of mastery, where you feel «in the groove», and try to analyze it. Then recall your nightmare performance. These experiences can provide extremely useful information that, when handled properly, can revolutionize your playing.

3.2 Daily event diary

Another good tip from the sports world is to keep a Daily Event Diary. Keeping a diary has a long and positive history. When we record the events of our lives, we not only express ourselves on matters close to the heart, we also focus attention where it's most needed, through our choices of what to record. Often we begin to see patterns in our actions. This can apply to our musical lives as well. A Daily Event Diary will make it easier to focus on your own basic obstacles to good performance, preparing you for the next step: overcoming those obstacles.

Many professionals think of psychological skills in the same way most people think of physical skills. Both can be practiced and improved. If you want your legs to be stronger, you train in a certain way. If you want certain parts of your inner self to be stronger, there are mental exercises you can do. Standard techniques used in sport psychology include relaxation and body awareness; positive imagery, affirmations and confidence building. It is also used a lot of mental rehearsing like concentration building, cognitive skills training and goal setting. These exercises are central to any serious attempt to improve the inner game.

4. MENTAL EXERCISES TO STRENGTHEN YOUR PERFORMANCE⁸

Relaxation

You need to be relaxed if you are to perform well. Your body cannot be too tense if you expect your muscles to do their jobs well. It is essential to find yourself a good relaxation imagery technique that aims at the physical aspects of good relaxation, using the mind as the main tool to get there. It should focus on the feelings in the body, your muscles, and on your thoughts and motivations.

⁸ The recommendations that follow in this chapter are from Kaus (2001) *Mastering your inner game*

Positive imagery, affirmation and confident building

From early age, sport coaches teach the athletes to see themselves winning, to tell themselves that they can do it, to be confident. This is something music teachers and professors could focus more on. This is the path to competitive success.

Affirmation can be defined as positive verbal statements that when repeated over time in positive circumstances enhance performance. For example: *I am strong, I am smart, I will win, I will do whatever it takes to win, I will find a path to success no matter what.*

Affirmations are not successful if they feel forced. Start in a gradual manner. They should be short and simple, and aim directly to the goal. Begin with the basic, lower-level statements and repeat them until you believe them strongly, until they are a part of you.

Positive imagery is a good and basic approach to positive performance. It consists of seeing your-self succeed in the competition/audition/concert. The easiest path is to start with your strongest, simplest image-memories of your past successes. Not thoughts, but pictures. Make the image stronger by applying other senses like smell, sound, emotions etc. As you review your memories of earlier life and music experiences, you'll find that obstacles don't always lead to negative experiences. Some of the most useful images can flow from recollections of those times when you managed to overcome strong obstacles.

The next step in your positive imagery can be to create strong images of future success. Practice is essential when using positive imagery. You should take a step-by-step approach, and stick with the images so that you can strengthen them with repeated use. It's not as simple as creating some positive thoughts once or twice, and waiting for the magic to happen. Practice your strong positive images again and again through the good and bad days. Find moments in your past, which gave you the right feeling of mastering, enjoying, and being in «the zone», not necessarily an important and big event. This should create a feeling of happiness, energy and the urge to play. The joy of such moments is far stronger than vague images/dreams of total success. «I might have a talent, a gift, but my greatest asset is my mind, with its strong discipline and inner power».

Confidence

The confident athlete/musician trusts his or her body, self and spirit. A steady stream of

positive experiences usually cultivates confidence naturally, but it is much easier said than done. Everybody has good and bad days. Underlying your confidence, or lack of confidence, is the issue of self-judgement. It can be difficult to convince yourself to be more confident and to play more confident without first changing the way you are thinking, and what you are telling yourself. Who doesn't know these thoughts, especially on the day of a competition/concert/audition: «I'm not good enough. I haven't practiced enough. Look how good the other players are». These negative thoughts and self-judgement cognitions prevent us from playing naturally. Just as you have learned such negative thoughts, you can unlearn them. Nobody is born with doubting themselves. It's the aspects of your life experiences that teach you this. Turning off the self-judging thoughts is quite impossible. To replace them with positive thoughts is just as impossible. The key is to replace them with something else.

If you can change the the cognition (thoughts), that comes to your mind when something happens to you, you can change your feeling and behavior and your performance as well. What should you think? First you need awareness of an alternate feeling of self-worth. You need to be aware of your essential value as a person, other than how well you perform on stage. Second, think of a specific and positive reminder of what you are capable of doing right in your profession.

Mental rehearsal and visualization are two other important steps towards a top performance. Mental rehearsal is simple. You go through the performance in your mind, visualizing the body performing as it's supposed to on the stage. This exercise can give you a nice and relaxing alternative to your worried or negative thoughts. You practice the brain pathways, the nerve impulses and the muscle memory, only with your mind. The more detailed visualization, the more the body and brain will learn.

Concentration is another vital key to success. No matter how gifted, talented and musical you are, you also need the ability to focus over longer time. The resting of concentration is as important as the focus of concentration. You should be aware of where your mind can rest, so you can focus fully when it's most needed; at difficult shifts, fast runs, long phrases etc. If you are playing some accompanying parts, your mind can rest a bit more than if you are playing a powerful melody in a high register. Without some points of rest, your performance is nothing but an unending span of attention that your mind will not be able to focus as a whole.

5. CONCLUSION

It is important to remember that to knowing all these facts is not enough. The biggest step is to do exercises and training, properly and regulary. But remember that music, like life, can never be fully mastered. That's maybe the biggest joy in it. The most important thing is that you do your best, and to appreciate your efforts and your success.

RESOURCES:

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