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The Mind in Focus

*The effects of various concentration strategies
on musical performance*

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Abstract

This paper investigates the efficacy of using various concentration strategies during musical performance in order to redirect the mind away from distracting thoughts and back to the present moment. I have recorded myself playing three different musical passages with four different mental focuses: physical sensations, technique, mental imagery, and internal singing. Throughout this research, I have analyzed both the musical expression and accuracy of these recordings, as well as the effect these focus strategies had on my mental atmosphere. While the usefulness of these four mental focus strategies would depend on many circumstances (including the individual musician and the musical demands of the passage), I have found that mental imagery and internal singing created the most musical results in my own playing. The process of practicing these concentration strategies has also improved my ability to observe and redirect my thoughts while playing.

Key words

[mental training, concentration, focus strategies, mental skills, musical performance]

Contents

<u>1. Background</u>	5
<u>1.1. Introduction</u>	
<u>1.2. Mental interferences: practice vs. performance</u>	
<u>1.3. The ideal state of mind</u>	6
<u>1.4. Focus strategies</u>	
<u>2. Methods</u>	8
<u>2.1. Selection of focus strategies</u>	
<u>2.2. Selection of musical passages</u>	9
<u>2.3. The process of recording and analysis</u>	11
<u>3. Physical Sensations</u>	12
<u>3.1. Getting into the mindset</u>	
<u>3.2. Recording analysis</u>	
<u>3.2.1. Intermezzo</u>	13
<u>3.2.2. Tarantella</u>	
<u>3.2.3. El Paño Moruno</u>	14
<u>3.3. Conclusions</u>	
<u>4. Technique</u>	16
<u>4.1. Getting into the mindset</u>	
<u>4.2. Recording analysis</u>	
<u>4.2.1. Intermezzo</u>	
<u>4.2.2. Tarantella</u>	17
<u>4.2.3. El Paño Moruno</u>	
<u>4.3. Conclusions</u>	18
<u>5. Mental Imagery</u>	19
<u>5.1. Getting into the mindset</u>	
<u>5.2. Recording analysis</u>	
<u>5.2.1. Intermezzo</u>	20
<u>5.2.2. Tarantella</u>	
<u>5.2.3. El Paño Moruno</u>	21
<u>5.3. Conclusions</u>	
<u>6. Internal Singing</u>	22
<u>6.1. Getting into the mindset</u>	
<u>6.2. Recording analysis</u>	

<u>6.2.1. Intermezzo</u>	
<u>6.2.2. Tarantella</u>	
<u>6.2.3. El Paño Moruno</u>	23
<u>6.3. Conclusions</u>	
<u>7. Discussion</u>	24
<u>7.1. Quadrants of focus</u>	
<u>7.2. Further Research</u>	25
<u>8. Conclusion</u>	27
<u>References</u>	28

1. Background

1.1. Introduction

Playing music at a high level, with both expression and technical accuracy, requires a great deal of mental focus. However, many musicians experience mental interferences that negatively affect their playing. Whether in the practice room or in a performance, this mental chatter can greatly hinder a musician's ability to communicate their ideas and showcase their full musical potential.

In *The Inner Game of Music*, Green and Gallwey (1986) use the formula " $P=p-i$ " (in which P stands for Performance, p for potential, and i for interference) to illustrate that the success of a musician's performance is not only a matter of potential (innate skills, time spent practicing, etc.), but also the degree to which the musician experiences interferences (p. 23). Therefore, at least in theory, a musician can improve their performance not only by increasing potential, but also by decreasing interferences.

1.2. Mental interferences: practice vs. performance

In my own experience performing music for others on the double bass, I have noticed that my mind often becomes flooded with thoughts that distract me from the current musical moment. These mental interferences can not only cause issues such as memory lapses and technical errors, but they also deter me from expressing what I want to communicate musically. I may, for example, become more conservative with my playing as I worry about playing all the right notes, and lose the sense of freedom that contributes to a wider range of expressive possibilities. While practicing, on the other hand, I tend to experience much less mental noise, and am often not as acutely aware of my own thinking. I find myself, so to speak, "in the zone," and am therefore more easily and authentically able to execute my musical ideas.

I am not alone in this experience. Many musicians experience this change in mental atmosphere while performing as compared to practicing. This sudden flood of new thoughts and sensations can easily become detrimental to a musician's performance, especially if they are not accustomed to the process of refocusing the mind. Madeline Bruser (2013) expresses this phenomenon beautifully in *The Art of Practicing*:

"You walk on stage and notice every little thing—how your shoe feels on your foot, how the light hits the floor, how the shadows fall, every little sound in the audience. You think, 'Oh no! I don't know if I can do this! All these things are going on!' These things are going on every day, all day in your life, yet suddenly you are aware of them. As you place your fingers on your instrument or open your mouth to sing, you feel extraordinarily sensitive to every move you make" (p. 19).

If a musician is not accustomed to playing with this level of awareness while practicing, this sudden newfound awareness can cause a lot of unnecessary unpredictability and insecurity to a performance. So how can we as musicians hone this awareness in the practice room?

1.3. The ideal state of mind

Performance events are unpredictable, and the mental and physical demands involved in performing a piece of music are complex. Therefore, a musician's mind needs to be flexible enough to shift and redirect its focus. As Williamon (2004) puts it, "the performer should be mentally agile enough to change focus rapidly and smoothly in conjunction with the flow of relevant factors and external events" (p. 233).

While I understand that in a performance situation it is unrealistic to focus on one single element of music-making at a time, I thought it would be a helpful first step for me to train various focus skills individually in order to see the effect each of them has on my playing as well as my mind. I also thought it may increase my awareness of my own mental processes as I play, and improve my ability to observe and redirect my thoughts. Just as one might focus on the sensation of breathing or a mantra while meditating, I predicted that having a single chosen focus at a time may make it easier for me to redirect my mind when it wandered.

Throughout this research, I sought to hone my metacognitive awareness in the practice room in order to 1) discover which modes of thinking allow me to most authentically express my musical ideas, and 2) be better equipped to handle mental interferences during performance. It is my hope that I will eventually be able to transfer these mental training skills from the practice room to performance, and that these focus techniques will silence some of the mental noise that can detract from a convincing performance.

1.4. Focus strategies

There has been a good deal of research done on strategies to cope with mental interferences and train the mind to stay more present while performing. Several of these strategies call for the musician to focus the mind on one particular aspect of music-making, in the hopes that focusing the mind on a singular thing will blur out any other, less useful thoughts.

In *The Inner Game of Music*, for example, Green and Gallwey (1986) suggest choosing one of four mental focuses to practice staying in the present moment while playing:

- **Sight:** what the musician sees as they play (for example, the notes on the score or the bow moving across the strings of their instrument)
- **Sounds:** what the musician hears as they play (for example, the sounds of their instrument or other instruments in an ensemble)
- **Feelings:** what feelings the music evokes or the musician wants to express

- ***Understanding***: what the musician knows about the piece of music (for example, the composer's intentions, the historical context, the style)

The authors provide exercises to practice these different modes of focus, some of which I have incorporated into my own practice and research. They argue that by directing one's focus toward a singular aspect of the present moment, one can cope better with interferences and more directly express oneself through the music.

Green and Gallwey also advocate for the strategy of singing music inside of your head, or as I refer to it later in this paper, *internal singing*. They claim that it can improve accuracy by increasing the speed at which a musician's mind and body can respond with unconscious adjustments (Green & Gallwey 1986).

In *The Art of Practicing*, Bruser (2013) suggests focusing on physical sensations in order to increase the pleasure of making music, claiming that "the more you enjoy using your body, the better your coordination and sound will be" (p. 199). She provides some techniques for focusing on the sensations of touch and movement while playing an instrument, and emphasizes the usefulness of practicing this in order to allow more personal and authentic musical expression.

2. Methods

2.1. Selection of focus strategies

Inspired by the various focus strategies mentioned above, as well as strategies I have been taught throughout my prior classical music training, I decided on four focus points to try in my own practice:

- **Physical sensations:** In which I focused on the feelings my body experienced while playing (ie. the vibrations in my right hand as the bow moves across the strings, the weight of the bass resting on my body, the fingers of my left hand pushing the string into the fingerboard, the small and large movements of my body as I play, etc.)
- **Technique:** In which I focus on technical aspects of playing (ie. the spacing between my left hand fingers, keeping my left hand fingers pressed in the fingerboard as I shift between notes, bow distribution, bow speed and weight, etc.)
- **Mental imagery:** In which I focus on a particular mental image that I think suits the musical passage (ie. birds flying over a mountain range)
- **Internal singing:** In which I focus on listening to my inner voice singing the melody as I play

I chose these four aspects of focus because they are all relatively familiar to me, so I imagined they should be fairly natural for me to maintain focus on. Upon reflection, I've realized that in the past I have involuntarily focused the most on technique and internal singing while I play. I have used mental imagery at times to find meaning and expression in a piece of music I am playing, although it is not something I use as frequently as I would like to. While I often focus on physical sensations during my warm-up routine before practicing, I find that I often lose touch with the minute details of physical sensations as I play. However, when I do focus on physical sensations, I almost always discover something new about my playing.

I also chose these four aspects because two of them (physical sensations and technique) are more grounded in the physical world of the body and the instrument, whereas the other two (mental imagery and internal singing) take place more in the mind and imagination. I was especially curious to compare these two more general modes of awareness, one being more of a technical mindset while the other is a more abstract, dreamy mindset.

It is perhaps natural to assume that a more technical mindset would lend itself to more “accurate” yet less expressive playing, while a dreamier mindset would lend itself to more musical expression. However, any musician will also surely have discovered that technical awareness and skill are vital in order to thoroughly execute and communicate musical ideas. For example, string players are familiar with the need to practice adjusting bow speed and weight in order to create the desired phrasing and avoid unintentional accents or dynamic changes that can result from the physical properties of bowing. Ideally, a musician’s

technique will reach a point where these technical skills become automatic and the mind is free to focus fully on the music. As Victor Wooten (2008) writes in *The Music Lesson*:

“To the real musician, techniques are nothing more than tools to get you somewhere. We only need to focus on them long enough to find the correct and most efficient ways of doing things. Once we do that, our attention turns back to Music” (p. 89).

However, I know that this is not always my reality, as I continue to develop and sharpen the technical skills needed to convey the musical ideas I have in my head. Therefore, I was curious to see how a more technical mindset versus a more general musical mindset would affect the musicality and accuracy of my playing. Is my technique with these passages sufficient for me to fully trust my body, and maintain my focus on the music?

2.2. Selection of musical passages

I chose three musical passages to record in order to document the outcomes of using these four focus strategies. The musical passages I chose are all from pieces I will perform on my Masters exam concert on May 10th, 2023. Therefore, they are passages I had already been practicing for some time prior to recording, and for which I had already established bowings and fingerings. Because the musical demands of different passages may require different modes of thinking, I tried to select passages that contrast in both mood and technical demands. This would also allow me to more accurately analyze the effects these focus points have on the various aspects of my playing. In each of the recordings, I have played from memory so that my mind would be free to focus on the chosen area of focus as opposed to reading the notes.

These are the three musical passages I chose:

1. *Intermezzo* from *Deux Morceaux pour contrebasse et piano*, Op. 9 by Glière

The image shows a musical score for the opening theme of 'Intermezzo' from 'Deux Morceaux pour contrebasse et piano' by Glière. The score is written in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 3/4. It consists of five staves of music. The first staff contains measures 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8. The second staff contains measures 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13. The third staff contains measures 14, 15, 16, 17, and 18. The fourth staff contains measures 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, and 24. The fifth staff contains measures 25 and 26. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings like 'dim.' and 'f'.

Figure 1: Opening theme (measures 5-26) of “Intermezzo”

The above passage I selected from *Intermezzo* is sweeping and lyrical, presenting primarily the challenges of playing expressively with a smooth legato. It also presents some intonation challenges, given that some of the intervals require large shifts on my instrument.

2. *Tarantella* from *Deux Morceaux pour contrebasse et piano*, Op. 9 by Glière

Figure 2: Main theme (measures 9-25) of “*Tarantella*”

This passage from the main theme of *Tarantella* has the primary challenge of coordination between the left and right hand. Due to quickly moving notes and shifts, the left hand must move quite mechanically and slightly anticipate the bow changes in order to make every note speak clearly. One must also manage to create long phrases out of these quickly-changing notes.

3. *El Paño Moruno* from *Siete Canciones Populares Españolas* by de Falla

Figure 3: Main theme (measures 24-40) of “*El Paño Moruno*”

This third passage is from a work originally written for soprano voice and piano. I try to perform it with a singing yet dance-like quality. It presents both technical and expressive challenges, with some of the technical challenges being frequent shifts and achieving clarity on sixteenth/thirty-second notes under slurs (for example in measures 26 and 30).

2.3. The process of recording and analysis

Over the course of six days, I recorded myself playing the three different musical passages while concentrating on one of the four focus points at a time.

On Day 1, I did an overview of each of the focus points by recording myself playing each of the three passages with each of the four focus points. I then dedicated a different day (or two in the case of *physical sensations*) to each of the focus points, in order to delve deeper into these four mental atmospheres and to practice refocusing my attention when my mind drifted. I took notes after making each recording, in order to remember how it felt and whether I was able to maintain my attention on the intended focus point. I intentionally did not practice these passages in between recording sessions, in order to avoid external factors of improvement that could obscure the results. The only time I played them in between recording sessions was while practicing getting into the mindset of the mental focus I was about to record.

When analyzing the recordings, I listened first without knowing which recording corresponded with which focus point, to ensure objectivity in the analysis (or, as much objectivity as is possible when analyzing one's own musical performance). I kept the audio file names vague (ie. "Zoom0001"), but had a master list to refer to so that I could later identify which recording corresponded to which mental focus as I analyzed.

Throughout the rest of this paper, I will share my analysis of these recordings, and my experience with each of these mental focus strategies.

3. Physical Sensations

I took quite a few recordings of myself playing with a focus on physical sensations, because I found it was one of the more difficult elements for me to acutely focus on. As far as the senses, I have realized that sight and sound tend to be the most in the forefront of my mind as I play. Because this element of touch and movement was more difficult for me to maintain focus on, I spent two practice/recording sessions over the course of two days (Days 2-3) dedicated to physical sensations (in addition to Day 1 when I briefly overviewed each of the focus strategies). This allowed me to practice getting deeper into this mindset and maintaining this focus while recording, without involuntarily switching my focus to other aspects of playing.

3.1. Getting into the mindset

There were a few things I did in order to get myself into the mindset to focus on physical sensations before recording. On Day 2, I lay on the floor before picking up my instrument and spent some time tuning in to the sensations in my body. With my eyes closed, I observed the points of contact between my body and the floor. I noticed that the temperature in the room felt quite cold. I used some methods I learned from a course in my undergraduate studies inspired by the Feldenkrais method which focused on body awareness. As I rose to pick up my instrument and get ready to play, I tried to actively maintain this awareness of physical sensations. I noticed, for example, the weight of my bass as I lifted it from the floor, and the coldness of the metal machine heads as I tuned my instrument. I felt very relaxed while getting set up to play, and more precise in my movements.

On Day 3, I opted to warm up using my instrument, but focused on the physical sensations of playing. I played simply and slowly, following the intuition of my body to decide what to play in each moment. If I noticed, for example, a feeling of hesitance in my left hand while moving from one particular position to another, I would explore that shift slowly and observe the feeling of executing it accurately and with confidence. If my body was feeling particularly lethargic, I would perhaps gradually begin to play faster in order to wake up my coordination and muscles. I often do this kind of warm-up when I first pick up my bass for the day, in order to establish the connection to my instrument. I have found it very useful for getting in touch with how my body is feeling on that particular day, as well as discovering what kinds of movements or playing demands trigger a feeling of hesitation or tension in my body and mind.

3.2. Recording analysis

The sounding results of these recordings using a focus on physical sensations were quite varied. However, one quality that pervaded almost all of the recordings with this focus was improved tone quality. There are several potential reasons for this:

- 1) This method made me feel more relaxed, which helped to create an open sound that was not too pressed or choked by tension.
- 2) I was more aware of the tension in my body when it did start to occur, which allowed me to respond more swiftly by adjusting my technique or movements.
- 3) I was more in tune with the connection between my body and instrument (particularly the contact between the bow and the strings). I was able to feel the vibrations from the bow traveling through my hand and arm, which ensured that my bow stayed in good contact with the strings and I could adjust the speed and weight according to the needs of each note.

3.2.1. *Intermezzo*

[This recording](#) I did of the *Intermezzo* on Day 3 is a good example of the relaxed tone quality mentioned above.

In other recordings of *Intermezzo* with this focus on physical sensations, I noted in my recording analysis notes that the sound was “more patient,” “gentle/sensitive,” “legato and flowy,” and “like one big idea.” These observations are also consistent with the relaxed mood I felt as a result of this mindset. However, the intonation suffered in some of the recordings, partially due to the fact that I closed my eyes at times in order to focus more acutely on the physical sensations of playing. I tend to use the visual cues of my instrument as well as my hearing in order to play in tune, so it is not surprising to me that the intonation suffered when I put both vision and hearing in the background of my thinking.

3.2.2. *Tarantella*

In the recordings of *Tarantella*, the intonation did not suffer as noticeably but the phrasing and expression did. I noted in my analysis notes that several of the recordings sounded “beat-y,” with “not much dynamic contrast” and “not as good flow.” [This recording](#) I took on Day 3 shows this, as you can hear a slight accent on every beat rather than hearing the larger phrase.

I find it interesting albeit not necessarily surprising that the phrasing and expression suffered more in *Tarantella* compared to *Intermezzo*. The mood of *Intermezzo* fits more naturally with the calm, relaxed mindset this method cultivated in me, whereas *Tarantella* demands more of an explosive energy. Ideally, I could still carry this calm awareness of physical sensations with me as I play more energetic and technical passages, but I think this will take more practice.

Some significant coordination and technical issues occurred during these recordings of *Tarantella*, some of which have never been a noticeable issue for me before while practicing. The most recurring was the jump from the G (which I perform as a harmonic with the thumb) to the third finger C in measure 11 and measure 19 [[see figure 2, p. 10](#)]. This could be due to

the fact that the harmonic G does not require good contact from the left hand in order to sound clearly, whereas the third finger C requires firm contact from four fingers. Without relying on other elements such as vision to execute this change from just the thumb lightly touching the string to four fingers firmly pressed down, this maneuver becomes much more risky.

In [this recording](#) I even stopped and restarted the passage after missing this switch to the third finger C in measure 11, only to have it occur again in measure 19 after restarting.

Perhaps with more practice focusing on the physical sensations of this particular finger change, or by pressing the thumb down for the G rather than performing it as a harmonic, this problem could be solved while still maintaining focus on physical sensations.

3.2.3. *El Paño Moruno*

At first I found it especially difficult to maintain focus on physical sensations during this particular passage, because the notes and rhythms themselves demand a lot of my attention. There are quite a lot of shifts that must happen quickly, some bow distribution problems I need to think about, and not a lot of repetition. While the intonation suffered when my eyes were closed, there were not huge intonation problems when I allowed my eyes to be open.

This passage also showed clear improvement from Day 2 to Day 3. While the individual pitches in the descending sixteenth/thirty-second note slurs were not clearly audible on [Day 2](#), this improved on [Day 3](#)* as I increased my awareness of the sensation of my left hand fingers pressing the string firmly into the fingerboard.

(*Note: the audio quality of this recording is lessened, as I had to record it on my phone while having technical problems with the Zoom microphone.)

3.3. Conclusions

This focus technique felt the most beneficial to me while warming up and preparing to play, as well as while practicing technical problems such as shifts. The act of focusing on physical sensations put me in a relaxed state of mind, which created good tone quality results at the occasional expense of intonation. While I am not sure I am comfortable enough yet with this focus strategy to use it reliably while performing, I can definitely see myself using it in order to calm and center my mind before playing in a performance. I will also continue to use it in order to identify areas of tension and solve technical problems while practicing. The relaxed state of mind this method provided me could also potentially help me build skills more quickly, as research suggests that we learn skills better when our minds are in a relaxed state (Benson & Klipper 2009). I could also see myself using this strategy momentarily during a performance if I notice myself feeling disconnected from my instrument or my sound, or if I am starting to lose good tone quality.

This exercise was a useful reminder to me that it is the connection between my body and my instrument that is responsible for producing all of the sounds I have in my mind. Without exercising this awareness of physical sensations, there can be a rift between mind and body (or between body and instrument) that prevents me from expressing the music the way I imagine. I would like to continue to develop this strategy, and know it will take time and practice to do so.

4. Technique

4.1. Getting into the mindset

Any classically trained musician is surely familiar with using technical exercises to warm up. However, the usefulness of these exercises can be debated, and depends on how exactly they are used. Bruser (2013) writes in *The Art of Practicing* that “the value of an exercise depends on your state of mind. If you don’t find it interesting, then it is not useful” (p. 17). While it felt obvious to use technical exercises to warm up for focusing on technique, I knew I would need to give these technical warmups proper attention for them to be effective. Therefore, on Day 4 of recording, I warmed up by practicing a couple of technique exercises (a thumb position finger exercise from Petracchi’s *Simplified Higher Technique* and a sound-focused bowing exercise from my teacher) with intention and awareness.

4.2. Recording analysis

It probably does not come as a surprise that the recordings in which I focused on technique ended up overall having less musical expression. In listening to the recordings I often noticed less dynamic contrast, occasionally less tempo fluctuation, as well as shorter, less natural phrases. In some recordings, in which I allowed my mind to more freely tie together my technique with the intended phrasing, the expression improved. This likely meant, however, that I was simultaneously singing the music inside my head (rather than focusing strictly on technique).

The tone quality also suffered in some cases, sounding more pressed and less open. I was relatively surprised to find that neither the intonation nor the coordination were significantly better than the other recordings (although these factors were not noticeably worse either).

4.2.1. *Intermezzo*

I recorded the *Intermezzo* passage several times with this technique focus. I realized while recording that thinking about “technique” in general felt a bit too broad, so I chose to mostly focus on intonation (left hand technique) since that seemed to be the most noticeable problem for me in this passage.

While thinking about left hand technique, the shifts between notes became much more audible—almost glissandos—which was not my musical intention. This is likely a result of trying to have “good” technique by keeping my fingers pressed into the fingerboard while shifting, however without having listened carefully to the sounding result while playing.

Many of the recordings also had a more abrupt rather than gentle start. The crescendos and decrescendos were less fluid, long, and gradual than I intend them to be, with the phrasing sounding more like small bumps rather than long smooth hills. I found these recordings to be

especially “note-y” during the section from measures 9-12 [[see figure 1, p. 9](#)]. There was also overall less tempo fluctuation, without as much time taken on the more important notes that I would like to emphasize.

All of these things can be heard in [this recording](#), as well as the aforementioned “pressed” tone. The difference in phrasing is especially evident when compared to the recording of *Intermezzo* from the above Physical Sensations section (linked again [here](#)).

4.2.2. Tarantella

I expected this technical mindset to work better for *Tarantella*, since it is a more technical piece, but I was surprised to find that the technical aspects suffered in quite a few recordings in addition to the phrasing. Some recordings had coordination issues, as well as mistakes that I had never made while practicing. [This recording](#), for example, had some clear coordination issues in measure 15 leading into the trill, as well as at the end in measure 24 [[see figure 2, p. 10](#)]. The lack of interesting dynamic contrast can also be heard.

The same technical mishap previously mentioned in the *Physical Sensations* section—missing the 3rd finger C that follows the harmonic G—occurred in [this recording](#).

Overall, it seems this technical mindset was not very beneficial to this passage despite its technical challenges.

4.2.3. El Paño Moruno

Of the three passages, this one benefitted the most from the technical mindset. The intonation was improved, the coordination was good, and the tone had a surprisingly singing and relaxed quality. The slurred descending sixteenth and thirty-second notes that were a problem in some of the *Physical Sensations* recordings were no longer an issue with this technical mindset. The musicality was not noticeably better than recordings from other days, but it was not noticeably worse either. The most noticeable expressive issues were a lack of dynamic contrast as well as a lack of tempo fluctuation. All of these things can be heard in [this recording](#) from Day 4.

I am not entirely sure why this passage ended up being better suited to a technical mindset, but it could be because the left hand must shift positions more rapidly and more frequently than in *Intermezzo* and *Tarantella*. Having full awareness of my technique during these shifts, as well as being able to focus on my vision and looking at my instrument, may have helped me execute them more accurately. As well, the bow needs to be quite firmly pressed into the string to play this passage with a rich and full sound; therefore, this passage lends itself better to the heavier bow weight which seemed to result from this mindset, causing problems of a pressed or crunched sound in the earlier two passages.

4.3. Conclusions

There are times that it may be beneficial or necessary to shift focus to technique, for example if there is a passage that one has not yet mastered technically. However, it is important to be wary that this does not deter too much from musical expression, and that we do not get stuck in this technical mindset when it is not necessary or beneficial. I have found that occasionally, as long as I have done the technical preparation while practicing, it is more helpful for my coordination to simply trust my fingers and not focus too much on technique. I have also found that focusing on my bow technique while trusting my left hand fingers can be a good way to maintain musicality and good sound, without the coordination errors that can result from too much focus on the left hand.

I have also realized the need for me to actively think about relaxing as an element of technique, in order to avoid the technical mindset creating unnecessary tension. During many of the recordings with a technical focus, I found my body tensing up.

It was relatively natural for me to focus on technical aspects while I played, as I think this is often on my mind as I practice and perform. However, this experience has made me realize this mindset is not always beneficial, and can in fact be detrimental to the music. This is even more reason for me to continue increasing my awareness of what I focus on as I practice, and to practice more frequently with a broad focus so that I can trust myself to do the same in a performance setting.

5. Mental Imagery

I can recall many times during orchestra rehearsals in which a conductor has expressed a mental image to the orchestra, and the musical expression from the orchestra instantly improved. It feels like some kind of mysterious, magical occurrence—in which perhaps nobody really understands what they did differently, but suddenly the music comes alive and becomes goosebump-worthy. I have experienced similar moments while being coached in a chamber group and in solo lessons. Despite having experienced the magic this strategy can bring to the music being played, it is rare I allow myself to journey into this broad kind of mindset while performing solo repertoire. It takes a lot of trust in my abilities and knowledge of the music. It also takes practice to be able to shift in and out of this more abstract mindset.

5.1. Getting into the mindset

Before recording each passage with this focus, I chose a mental image that I thought suited the music and the way I wanted to play it. I closed my eyes and focused on this mental image, and then tried to maintain that focus while playing. I quickly realized it was very difficult not to think about the physical demands of executing each passage. Holding a mental image in mind felt quite far removed from the tactile and auditory aspects of playing, which led in some cases to intonation problems and overall insecurity. Therefore, I began to adjust and practice the way I prepared myself mentally for this focus.

I found it helpful to practice incorporating my body motions with the mental image, in order to ground the abstract image in something more tangible. For example, I chose the image of a river for *Intermezzo*, and began to imagine that my whole body was the river itself rather than simply picturing a river in my mind while I played.

I also found it helpful for the mental image to be something dynamic and moving (more of a video inside the mind rather than a still image), so that the mental image can transform more naturally with the music as it changes.

On Day 5, I also took time to warm up with my instrument in a more familiar fashion first (with scales and thirds), in an attempt to be able to trust myself playing in this more abstract state of mind.

5.2. Recording analysis

The recordings noticeably improved as I practiced incorporating the mental image with my physical movements. While there were technical and intonation issues that occurred in some cases, the musicality overall was improved while using mental imagery.

5.2.1. Intermezzo

As mentioned earlier, I chose the image of a river to fit this flowy, legato passage from *Intermezzo*. On Day 1, I initially found it quite difficult to fully immerse myself in the mental image without getting distracted by other thoughts, for example how exactly to place my bow for the first note, or judging myself when the notes were out of tune.

The first note felt especially sensitive, since it needs to start with a very gentle attack. It requires a lot of control to get the right amount of bow weight and appropriate bow speed for the sound to start audibly and in time but without any harsh attack. I felt some cognitive dissonance as I tried to focus on the river image, but simultaneously was concerned with what to do technically in order to execute the first note properly.

Despite these concerns, the execution of the first note in the recordings turned out to be much more gentle than in many of the other recordings. It worked especially well once I decided to try to embody the river, and used that feeling of broad, smooth gestures to execute the first note rather than focusing on the fine controlled movements of the bow. That can be heard in [this recording](#) from Day 1.

On Day 5, I practiced *Intermezzo* while connecting different parts of the mental image to the music. I imagined where the river would be flowing more rapidly or more calmly. In measures 9-12 [[see figure 1, p. 9](#)], I imagined the river flowing over small rocks to replicate the small skips and chromatic motion in the melody. On the sustained high E in measure 21, I imagined the river opening up into an area with no trees, where the sun could be seen shining through. After practicing in this way, I only did [this one recording](#), as I felt that it went very well. I felt free, relaxed, and able to focus on the mental image. In listening to this recording, it is arguably one of the best recordings I did of this passage. It has natural tempo and dynamic fluctuations, a relaxed tone, and sounds more like one big idea. While it has a couple of intonation issues, I feel they do not detract too drastically from the overall musicality. Overall, this recording fit much better with the musical ideas I envision for this passage.

5.2.2. Tarantella

For this passage, I chose the mental image of a large ship rocking back and forth on the ocean, with waves crashing underneath. I allowed myself to involve my body and gestures in this imagery, which led to me feeling the bigger impulses in the music. Several of these recordings had more energy and a more confident sound, although at times the coordination and control suffered. These recordings ended up sounding more consistently expressive and musical than any of the other focus methods for this passage. The tone had a more relaxed and singing quality, with the quarter notes that are slurred to eighth notes sounding more long and resonant. That can be heard in [this recording](#).

I think if I continue to practice the technical and coordination aspects of this passage so that I can completely trust my fingers, this focus method may be a very beneficial one to use while performing this passage.

5.2.3. *El Paño Moruno*

I found it difficult to come up with a mental image that I felt fit well with this piece. On Day 1 I imagined a singer performing the piece, and tried to embody that singer as I played. This led to a more confident sound. I also felt myself breathing more deeply and moving more freely. While it led to less-than-perfect intonation at times following large shifts, I felt this focus strategy did help somewhat with the musicality of this passage. As well, the technical aspects did not noticeably suffer—the notes spoke clearly, including the descending slurred sixteenth and thirty-second notes. This can all be heard in [this recording](#).

On Day 5, I changed the mental image in an attempt to find something that could change more dynamically with the music. I practiced playing the passage while imagining a group of dancers in Spain, dancing in pairs. Some dancers wore long skirts that would flow and twirl as they spun or were lifted by their partner. I imagined these lifts happening on the downbeats of measures 26 and 30 [*see figure 3, p. 10*]. One can hear in [this recording](#) the breath and space that this created in between these downbeats and the descending slurred notes that follow. I also imagined increased tension and passion in the dance from measure 36 until the end of the passage, which led to more dramatic tension and more of a ritardando at the end.

5.3. Conclusions

While this method felt occasionally detached from the physical demands of playing my instrument with control and accuracy, it cultivated different elements of musicality that were not evident in other recordings. The more I was able to practice incorporating my physical movements into the mental image, as well as the nuances in the music, the better the recordings became overall. When the technical aspects of a piece are in place, I think this could be a great method for me to use when I want to find new modes of expression and be able to communicate them clearly.

6. Internal Singing

As someone who tends to rely heavily on my ear when I play (as opposed to looking at the music), I tend to use internal singing quite frequently in order to stay musically present. Therefore, it is not surprising that this was the easiest of the four focuses for me to maintain my concentration on. Using singing as a means to inform natural phrasing in music is something many musicians and teachers advocate, and something I have worked on frequently in my interpretation lessons.

6.1. Getting into the mindset

In order to get into the mindset to play while singing in my head, I simply walked around the room singing each passage out loud before playing it. The act of walking around without having my instrument with me freed me to think about the melodies of each passage alone, without thinking about how I would play them on my instrument. I then practiced playing each passage while focusing on hearing myself sing the melody inside my head, and trying to make the sounding result match.

6.2. Recording analysis

Overall, the recordings with this focus were the most consistently expressive throughout the three passages. Out of the four focus methods I tried, this one created recordings that best matched the musical ideas I had in my head. It did not present any consistent coordination or intonation issues across the three passages, although these issues did present themselves in some of the *Tarantella* recordings.

6.2.1. *Intermezzo*

As you can hear in [this recording](#), playing *Intermezzo* with this focus overall resulted in good flow, better intonation than all of the other days, and natural tempo and dynamic fluctuations. The tone quality was perhaps a bit more pressed than it was while focusing on physical sensations and imagery, but it was better still than the tone quality while focusing on technique.

6.2.2. *Tarantella*

Playing *Tarantella* with this focus presented some more challenges. The coordination and intonation tended to suffer a bit more than on other days, likely because the notes change too quickly for me to really hear them in my head and adjust accordingly. As well, when I walked around singing the passage without my instrument, it turned out I was singing it much faster than I am able to play it. At first I tried to play it at the same tempo I sang in order to see if it was possible, but as you can hear in [this recording](#) it was difficult for my fingers to keep up in

measures 15 and 23 [\[see figure 2, p. 10\]](#). However, I was surprised how well I was able to manage most of the passage considering I had never practiced it at that tempo.

The phrasing of these recordings also tended to be better than the recordings with a focus on physical sensations or technique, although they did not have as much contrast as in the mental imagery recordings.

6.2.3. *El Paño Moruno*

This focus technique seemed to work well for this passage. While it felt nerve-racking to try to trust my body since this passage has so many shifts, the recordings with this focus had more musical contrast than most of the recordings from the other days. I try to change to a more dolce sound in measure 34 [\[see figure 3, p. 10\]](#), for example, and this change became more audible when focusing on internal singing. The ending also became more dramatic, which fit better with what I was singing in my head. [This recording](#) from Day 6 exemplifies this.

6.3. Conclusions

This was perhaps the most helpful focus strategy for me overall, with benefits in both musical expression and intonation. It felt easy for me to stay in the present musical moment, and to redirect my focus back to my internal singing when my mind would wander. It also made it easier for me to imagine the accompaniment part in my head while playing, and to listen and adjust my own sound as I played. Being able to hear the accompaniment in my head also helps me play more expressively, and in a way that makes more sense in the whole context of a piece. This is a strategy I will definitely continue to develop and use as I perform.

7. Discussion

Throughout this process of practicing different focus strategies and analyzing these musical passages, it has become evident to me just how nuanced and complex this dilemma of focus is for me as a performing musician. While mental imagery and internal singing appeared to work the best for me in these three musical passages, the best focus strategy for any musician to use would depend on many factors: the musician who is playing it, that musician's skills and concentration abilities, that musician's current mood and state of mind, the technical and expressive demands of the music being played, the level of preparation that musician has reached with the piece of music, etc. There were, however, some additional patterns and general insights that became clear in my time experimenting with these focus strategies in my own practice.

7.1. Quadrants of focus

A musician's mind and body need to work together while performing. This requires a level of preparation and technical ability that allows the musician to trust their body to complete the task at hand, thereby freeing up the mind to focus on the music as much as possible. This also requires the self-knowledge to determine when that ideal level of skill and preparation has actually been reached, and when one may need to fall back on thinking more actively about the technical tasks of playing. In addition to this self-knowledge, a musician must have practiced shifting between broader and more narrow focuses, so that they can move fluidly between these throughout a performance.

Williamon (2004) adapted the following chart from research on athletes done by Nideffer (1976) that displays four different quadrants of concentration that a performer should be able to shift between:

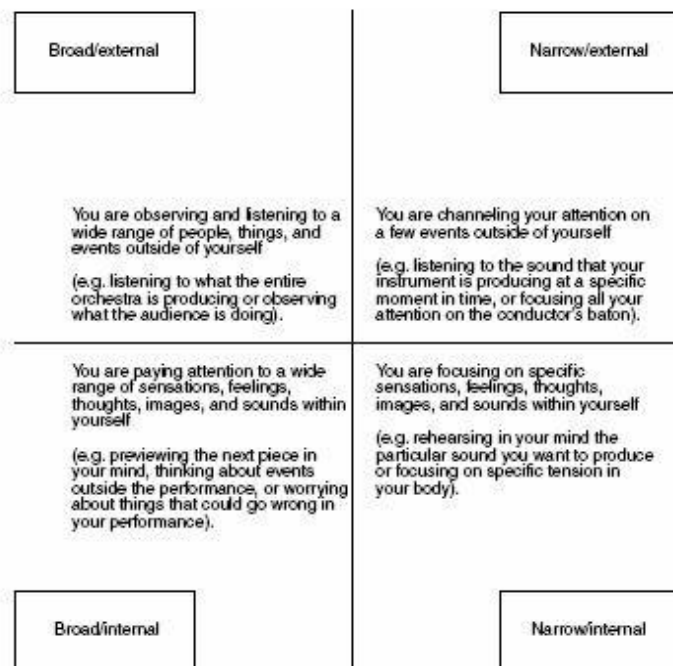


Figure 4: Four quadrants of concentration (Nideffer) adapted by Williamon (p.234)

It is helpful to familiarize oneself with which of the four quadrants one tends to fall back on, as well as which need to be developed more. While recording, as well as during some practice performances I did recently, I was surprised to notice just how frequently my mind falls into the narrow/internal category. I often noticed myself worrying what others would think about my playing, or critiquing my own playing (both positively and negatively). As I practiced these focus strategies, however, I did notice myself being more aware of these thoughts and therefore able to redirect them. I also noticed it is rare that I allow myself to focus on something more broad or external. This is something I want to continue to work on developing, particularly considering my recordings done with the focus on mental imagery had such positive musical results.

I was recently discussing this issue of shifting focus with a friend after I listened to her do a practice performance of the first movement of Tchaikovsky's *Violin Concerto in D Major*. Her goal with the play-through was to practice performing it for others and to investigate how she was able to focus as she performed it. She mentioned afterwards that she was mostly able to stay focused in the present moment and think about the music, partially by singing the music in her head and by listening to the sounds she produced. However, she mentioned that during some technical passages she had to shift her focus back onto her technique, because 1) the notes move too quickly to sing them accurately in her head, and 2) the movements have not yet become automatic. This idea of the notes moving too quickly to sing was a similar challenge I had using internal singing in *Tarantella*. I was impressed by this friend's level of self-knowledge to be aware of when she could or could not trust her body, as well as her ability to shift her focus between more broad and narrow quadrants of concentration.

7.2. Further research

Even through this relatively brief time I have spent honing these various focus skills, I have noticed a great improvement in my ability to observe and redirect my thoughts while I play. I have now successfully employed these techniques (particularly imagery and internal singing) during small informal performances when I noticed my mind veering toward unhelpful thoughts. I know, however, that these mental training skills take a longer time to master. As I become more familiar and comfortable with different focus strategies, I hope to reach a point where I know generally which focus strategies will help me perform my best during different sections of a piece of music, and to be able to shift fluidly between these during a performance. This detailed planning of what to focus on during different moments of playing a piece, while it may sound rigid, could bring me to another level of preparation that would help me redirect my thoughts more swiftly during a performance.

There are of course many additional focus strategies one could use, that I am also interested in developing. I have recently been particularly interested in focusing on listening, as I have noticed this is a simple yet effective focus to keep myself grounded in the current moment. I also realized recently while performing for a friend, that it can be helpful for me to simply focus on creating and enjoying a beautiful sound. I played through all of *Tarantella*, and had difficulty in the beginning finding good tone and coordination due to nerves. After going through some self-judgemental thoughts, I then decided to simply focus on making my bass

create as lovely of a sound as possible. The tone and clarity seemed to improve instantly, which then boosted my confidence and I was able to finish the piece strong.

I look forward to this continued journey of learning about how my mind concentrates while I play, and improving my ability to shift between more broad vs. narrow, as well as internal vs. external focuses.

8. Conclusion

While there may not be a one-size-fits all solution to what a musician should focus on to create the most ideal mental atmosphere to perform, my research suggests that the process itself of practicing different focus strategies can help develop a more flexible and agile mind. It will be an ongoing journey for me to understand how my mind focuses as I perform, and how to best prepare myself for this while in the practice room. It is a journey I encourage any musician to join me on, as I think it has the potential to create more meaningful, authentic, and enjoyable performances.

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