Getting in the Zone:

Finding a State of Peak Performance

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People call it different names: in the zone, in the groove, on fire, in the moment, present, unified, tuned in, a high, a rush. All these terms describe a similar sensation. One of my first experiences of being “in the zone” was at the finals for a NATS competition during my senior year of undergraduate studies. I was singing Papageno’s suicide aria from Die Zauberflöte and, near the beginning of the aria, made a reaching gesture with my right hand. I remember watching my hand and arm shake violently and a sense of terror crept over me. In that moment, a very simple thought came to me: “No.” My hand stopped shaking, my mind focused on the moment at hand, and I experienced a fascinating connection with the world around me. It was as if I could feel the audience, my pianist, and the music as never before. Time slowed down and I felt a unification of body, mind, and voice. It was as if I could do no wrong. And, in the blink of an eye, the aria was over. It was some of the most fun I had ever had performing.

“This,” I said to myself. “I want more of this.”

Since that time, I have experienced what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi [ˈmiːhæiˌtʃɪksɛntmiːhæi] calls “flow” on numerous occasions. Flow is “a state of
consciousness where one becomes totally absorbed in what one is doing, to the exclusion of all other thoughts and emotions.”¹ The body and mind work together effortlessly, “leaving the person feeling that something special has just occurred.”² Throughout his work, Csikszentmihalyi has conducted interviews with hundreds of people from peak athletes in all sports to musicians, elderly German gardeners, teenage Japanese motorcycle racers, Navajo shepherds, Hindu mystics, etc. Everybody, regardless of race, culture, or occupation, reports similar feelings when in flow.

The benefits of flow for performers are numerous. When in flow, the mind focuses solely on the present task. Extraneous concerns (the flat tire you had on the way to rehearsal, your mortgage payment, your upcoming vacation, etc.) slip away. Along with this intense focus comes a unification of mind and body, what Csikszentmihalyi and Susan Jackson call action-awareness merging. The body moves effortlessly, and practiced technique occurs without thought, almost automatically.³ This generates an intense sense of control, which “frees the [singer] from fear of failure and creates a feeling of empowerment for the challenging tasks to be executed.”⁴ Singers will experience a growing sense of ensemble and unity not just within themselves, but also within the entire cast and orchestra. Needless to say, flow is important for performers.

There are several factors that are essential to experiencing flow. I will discuss what I feel are the three most important: challenge/skill ratio, focus or attention, and goals and feedback.
The Challenge/Skill Ratio

One of the key requirements to entering a state of flow is finding a balance between the perceived challenge of a particular task and the individual’s skill. The task must be challenging enough to demand all of one’s attention, but not so challenging that the individual has no hope of accomplishing it. One rower described this idea as “challenging, but able to meet the challenge.”

Csikszentmihalyi’s flow model is a wonderful graphic that illustrates the importance of finding this balance. If the task is too easy and requires little skill to complete, individuals will experience boredom or apathy. If, on the other hand, the task is too difficult for the individual’s current set of skills, he/she will experience worry or anxiety. Finding a task that the individual perceives as challenging but feels they have the ability to complete successfully is paramount in inducing flow states.

What is interesting about this flow model is that the individual’s perception of challenge and skill is more important than the actuality: there is no concrete threshold for either challenge or skill. Rather, it changes from person to person and task to task. This has several ramifications. First, this means that flow is available to both beginners

and advanced singers. For a beginning singer, *Caro mio ben* poses a considerable challenge, but one that they are perfectly capable of meeting given proper teaching. However, more advanced students might find such “simplistic” repertoire boring. As their skill set grows, they require more challenging and demanding repertoire.

Second, it means that challenge and skill are relative and determined in large part by one’s attitude. Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi state, “It is important to realize what you believe you can do will determine your experience more than will your actual abilities.” This thought can be extended to state that what one believes is challenging determines one’s experience more than the actual challenge.

Third, challenge and skill are not constant and are in a state of flux. With each semester of study, a singer’s skill ideally increases. To facilitate flow experiences, the perceived challenge of the repertoire or performance must also increase proportionately to the increase in skill. This does not necessarily mean that a student must sing progressively more and more challenging repertoire. “Simple” music can be just as challenging and engaging if the performer has enough imagination. In fact, truly great singers are able to elevate even the most simplistic piece of music to that of expressive art (e.g. Luciano Pavarotti’s recording of the aforementioned *Caro mio ben*).

One way to increase the challenge of a given task is by the addition of constraints or restrictions. As the list of “rules” increases, so too does the challenge of the related
task. Psychologist Philip Johnson-Laird believes that constraint is an essential part of
the creative process.

In a study conducted by Catrinel Haught and Johnson-Laird, subjects were asked
to generate creative sentences based on objects or words that appeared on a computer
screen. The number and quality of those images and/or words changed, resulting in
different levels of constraint. For instance, a picture of a banana is more constraining
than just the word “banana.” The picture presents the object as seen at a specific point
in time from a specific point of view. It conveys considerably more information than
just the noun by itself, which can be imagined in numerous different variations:
“Pictures show a particular entity; words are general.” Haught and Johnson-Laird’s
results indicate that the more constraining a task, the higher chance its results will be
creative or unexpected.

This is not a new concept. In fact, Igor Stravinsky said, “The more constraints one
imposes, the more one frees oneself of the chains that shackle the spirit.” Music is, in
one sense, a language of constraint. Every pitch, rhythm, word, and dynamic marking
on the page limits the number of choices a singer has. Style is another incredibly
important constraint. One would not sing Mozart in the same manner as one would
sing Puccini. Other constraints that can be added to performances include stylistic
diction, text translation, tonal color, dynamics, dramatic intent, etc. With each level of
constraint, the difficulty or challenge of any given performance and its creative or
expressive potential increases. One must keep in mind, however, that the overall challenge of the task must relate to the skill of the performer or the chances of peak performance diminish.

**Focus or Attention**

When creating an appropriately challenging task, one must keep in mind that the task needs to be complicated enough to demand complete focus. The human brain has a finite conscious computational power. At most, it can manage seven bits of information or stimuli at one time and it takes a minimum of 1/18 of a second to discriminate between one set of bits and another. This means that the human brain can compute 126 bits of information or stimuli per second. This may seem like a lot; however, it is actually rather limiting. For example, one must process around 40 bits of information per second to understand a casual conversation. This does not include tone, inflection, body language, facial expression, or our own interpretations of motive, subtext, etc. Each of these “simple” parts of communication occupies a portion of the brain’s computation power. It is no wonder, then, why it is so difficult to invest completely in two distinct conversations at the same time: the brain lacks the computational power.

When one begins a task that is so all consuming it requires all 126 bits of conscious computational power, there is no mental energy left to process anything else: all attention is on the task at hand. The results are some of the most ubiquitous aspects of flow. Awareness of temperature, hunger, fatigue, or other discomforts fade. Actions
become automatic and spontaneous. The body seems to move of its own volition. People experience a transformation of time. The first act of a show might fly by (an hour seeming to pass in minutes), but at the same time it might feel like one has an infinite amount of time to breathe in the middle of those devilishly difficult Handel melismas. A dancer described to Csikszentmihalyi how it felt when a performance was going particularly well: “Your concentration is very complete. Your mind isn’t wandering, you are not thinking of something else; you are totally involved in what you are doing… Your energy is flowing very smoothly. You feel relaxed, comfortable, and energetic.” Similarly, a chess player stated, “the concentration is like breathing – you never think of it. The roof could fall in and, if it missed you, you would be unaware of it.”

For Timothy Gallwey in *Inner Game of Tennis*, focus is the principal way he encourages his students to quiet their conscious mind (self 1) and learn to trust their unconscious mind (self 2). He writes:

My experience over the years is that the best way to quiet the mind is not by telling it to shut up, or by arguing with it, or criticizing it for criticizing you. Fighting the mind does not work. What works best is learning to focus it…As one achieves focus, the mind quiets. As the mind is kept in the present, it becomes calm. Focus means keeping the mind now and here. Relaxed concentration is the supreme art because no art can be achieved without it, while with it, much can be achieved. One cannot reach the limit of one’s potential in tennis or any endeavor without learning it.
This, of course, begs the question, “How does one quiet the mind and learn to focus?”

To answer this, we turn to the third factor that allows one to experience flow: goals and feedback.

**Goals and Feedback**

To enter a state of flow one must have clear goals and unambiguous feedback regarding one’s completion of those goals. If focus and attention are important, one must have a clear idea of what exactly should occupy his or her attention throughout the completion of the task. As Gallwey states, “To still the mind one must learn to put it somewhere.”

The clarity and complexity of the goal will vary depending on the task and the skill level of the person completing the task. For instance, in tennis, the goal is rather simple: one must hit the ball over the net and in bounds. Feedback is immediate and unambiguous. Obviously more advanced players with higher skill sets will need to set more challenging goals, thus maintaining the challenge/skill balance; however, tennis is a good example of a task with a straightforward goal and clear feedback.

Performance and creative arts are a little trickier. A painter might not know exactly what he intends to paint as he sits at the canvas, but as he works a general idea begins to take shape. His goals become clearer and more defined as he paints. Singers and other stage performers have a slightly different issue. Often their focus wanes not
from a lack of goals, but rather from either trying to focus on too many different goals at one time or not refining and specifying their goals enough.

Specificity, in my opinion, is an incredibly important part of entering flow. It is a great way to help students find a balance between challenge and skill. As a student’s skills grow, increasing the specificity of the goal can help escalate the task’s overall challenge.

Dr. Bob Rotella writes an illustrative anecdote about golf pro Ben Hogan in his book *Golf is Not a Game of Perfect*:

Hogan came to the 5th hole, a 476-yard par five on which the green, because of the slope of the land, is not visible from the tee. A cluster of four tall palm trees, planted only a few feet apart, stands immediately behind the green and towers above the horizon.

When Hogan arrived at the tee, he asked his caddie for a target. “Aim for the palm trees, Mr. Hogan,” the caddie replied.

To which Hogan answered, “Which palm tree?”

The story is cited sometimes as an example of Hogan’s perfectionism. But what it really suggests is Hogan’s knowledge of one of the fundamental psychological principles in golf:

*Before taking any shot, a golfer must pick out the smallest possible target.*

Singers must make equally specific choices, but they must also limit the number of things they think about on stage. If the human brain has a finite amount of computational power, where one chooses to allocate that computational power is incredibly important. The singing process is complex, requiring a multitude of body and brain systems to work simultaneously, including alignment, respiration, phonation, resonance, articulation, text, style, translation, objectives and intentions, emotion,
awareness of the orchestra, awareness of others on stage, relationship to scene partners, relationship to audience… the list goes on. It is impossible for a singer to focus on a specific goal for each one of those: the brain simply lacks the ability to monitor not just the goal but also the feedback regarding the completion of that goal.

For this reason, I advise my students to pick only one technical and one dramatic goal for each performance. These goals can be tailored to the individual student’s skill, setting up an appropriate challenge/skill ratio for the performance. One example of using a single and clear goal relates to the concept of *appoggio*. I tell my students that *appoggio* does not necessarily relate only to breathing. Breath can be a single unifying gesture that organizes the entirety of one’s technique: alignment, respiration, phonation, resonance, and articulation. Once this unifying gesture has been practiced sufficiently, it becomes quasi-automatic. With a single thought, the singer can breathe and trust that his/her vocal technique is prepared. This leaves a majority of the brain’s computational power free to focus on dramatic and interpretive demands.

**Putting It All Together**

Though there are several other factors that facilitate entering a state of flow, I find that they all relate to these three. It is our job as teachers to help our students increase their skills so that they can take on more challenging repertoire, both technically and emotionally. It is also important that we teach them how to invest deeply in seemingly simple repertoire so that they can learn to engage and find
challenge in all music they perform. We can help our students learn to focus by increasing our expectations of them gradually and setting clear goals as their skills and abilities improve. In this way, we give our students the tools they need not only to sing well, but also to perform to their highest possible potential.

2 Ibid.
4 Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi, 26.
5 Ibid., 16.
7 Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi, 17.
10 Csikszentmihalyi, 29.
11 Ibid., 53.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 53-54.
15 Ibid., 75.
16 Csikszentmihalyi, 54.