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Overcoming stage fright starting in the practice room

Written reflection within independent, artistic project

The sounding parts of this independent, artistic project (orchestral excerpts 1-15 and Piano Quintet by Eduard Oja) are documented in DiVA.

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to overcome stage fright through different techniques of thorough preparation in the practice room. The main methods discussed are mindfulness and mental training.

Five selected orchestral excerpts have been prepared and performed using these methods, then presented as recordings in three different situations and analysed according to the performance quality that is then measured by percentage.

From my research I deduct that mental training is an essential part of practising that leads to less stage fright and will increase performance results dramatically.

Keywords: stage fright, performance anxiety, mental training, mindfulness, orchestral excerpts, performance quality

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1. Introduction

Most performing artists are on a seemingly never ending quest to find the solution to stage fright. This is something that common knowledge tells us can be conquered by experience on the stage only. In this thesis I will explore the possibility that I have come to in the recent years that perhaps the solution can instead be found in the practice room. I will research and experiment with different ways of learning a piece, including mental training techniques that would help me grasp the piece more efficiently from the very first practice session. This thesis is inspired by my every-day thoughts and struggles in the practice room and hopefully will help me explore them further.

1.2. Aim

My aim is to be able to play five excerpts from the audition repertoire to the Västerås Symfonietta in March 2019 as well at the audition as in the practice room. This means reaching my full potential, the 100% I am able to achieve without stage fright and the stress of performing, on stage.

2. Background

I have always experienced stage fright as is normal for most people. When I was younger I remember that the idea of getting on the stage and playing the violin or singing was uncomfortable. I didn't necessarily link that to the fact that I was experiencing stage fright *because* of something, rather that it just exists for everyone and is a given when one has to present something in front of an audience. I never did particularly good when performing but I just wrote it off to not being good enough of a player yet to achieve something nice on stage. When I got to my early twenties I started to really develop a problem with performing. I believe that when we are in the practice room playing through a piece without any disturbance or anxiety, we present 100% of what we are capable of at that time. But when performance anxiety kicks in the percentage will be lower due to the mental and physical distractions caused by it. How low the percentage will get is very different for everyone. By the second year of my Bachelor's studies my stage fright had become crippling and my percentage was probably around 20%. I was absolutely devastated after every performance or even our weekly group lessons. Especially after the group lessons, actually, because that meant that my peers saw me as someone with no confidence in their work and who was just not good at playing the violin, week after week. This lasted until about six months before I started to write this research when I really began to ask myself *why* I am experiencing this rather than just explaining it with "probably not having practiced enough."

2.1. What usually happens on the stage

Webster's dictionary defines 'anxiety' as an abnormal and overwhelming sense of apprehension and fear often marked by physical signs (such as tension, sweating, and increased pulse rate), concerning the reality and nature of the threat and one's capacity to cope with it.¹ Most people who have been on a stage or given a public performance of any kind have experienced performance anxiety and been through both the physical and mental symptoms. How much it affects your performance depends on several things: the individual's mental strength, preparation and also personality to some extent. For me it usually starts on the morning of the performance, I feel a bit on edge and I have trouble finishing my breakfast. By the time I am standing behind the stage door I

¹ Merriam-Webster Incorporated, 'Definition of anxiety', *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anxiety> (accessed 22.01.19).

usually feel the physical sensations of anxiety very severely: sweating, cold hands, shaky legs and/or arms, heart beating rapidly. I try to take deep breaths and think confident thoughts but sometimes my body doesn't respond to that at all. At times I think concentrating on these sensations (telling myself to relax, try to deepen my breath) actually gets me into an even worse state of anxiety where I feel shortness of breath, numbness of the hands or feet and severe dizziness. This is where I feel the fear of the threat, as Webster's dictionary points out. When I finally get on stage the fear of one's capacity to cope with the threat kicks in. When you haven't trained your mind to not wander during a given task, the thoughts that will arise during this unnatural state of the body will often be ones of self doubt, self criticism and also just random thoughts that take you away from the task and don't help your performance but rather harm it. When you don't feel present in what you are doing, you will start to feel uncomfortable and probably miss some of your targets which in turn makes the physical symptoms worse. That means you give a rather poor performance compared to what you are capable of without the distractions and sensations that occur on the stage.

2.2. What usually happens in the practice room

The way I practiced up to this point is probably common for a lot of music students. When first getting to know a new piece I would listen to one recording of it to hear how it goes and then get right into playing the whole piece through to get a feel of how difficult it will be. From the moment I had looked through it a couple of times, so that I pretty much knew what all the notes should sound like, I would have almost the same practicing method every day: play the piece until something doesn't sound right, correct it by repeating it as long as it seemed better and then continue. And exactly like that the next time as well. I will not get into how I tried to fix the places I wasn't happy with in this section but as I could see when presenting the piece to an audience, it wasn't working. The difficult places were still difficult and often some problems never got solved. I have learned now that this way of practicing is actually counter productive. When you play the piece through in concert you will stumble at the same places because that is how you have practiced it: play until it goes wrong and then repeat the place that went wrong. When you get on stage and start the composition, you are already nervous for the difficult places that are ahead because you have trained your brain to stop there and repeat, often accompanied by a feeling of frustration. When you experience the same frustration on stage it will result in an even worse outcome since the

adrenaline and added pressure will add physical symptoms like the stiffness of the hands and body, and sweat.

2.3. Auditioning

In order to get a job in a symphony orchestra or an ensemble one has to audition. That means playing the assigned pieces and orchestral excerpts in front of a jury often competing for one spot with tens or even a hundred other people. Usually there are three rounds and the first two are played behind a screen to make it anonymous. For violins the standard repertoire includes the first movement of a Mozart concerto with the cadenza and a romantic era concerto in the second round by either Mendelssohn, Sibelius, Brahms, Tchaikovsky or sometimes Beethoven. This could vary but it's usually how it goes. In addition one must play around 10 orchestral excerpts which are divided between the three rounds and some segments of an assigned string quartet or two together with musicians from the given orchestra in the final round. Auditioning is the most unnatural and uncomfortable part of the life of being a musician. 20+ years of practicing and music making, putting all of yourself into something that is so beautiful is going to be measured during the 5 minutes you play a page of Mozart and an excerpt or two behind a screen. This is something athletes are probably the most familiar with during big competitions. Years and years of training, but the only thing that actually counts is how you perform during the crucial moment. It is very easy to choke.

2.4. Playing excerpts

A large part of aspiring to be an orchestral musician is playing orchestral excerpts. Excerpts are just small segments taken out of an orchestral piece that one has to perform to a jury in order to win a job in an ensemble or orchestra. The difficulty with them is that in a symphonic piece you have tens of parts that put together make the wonderful musical work. But if you are only presented with a single one of them it is challenging both for the player and the listener to get the big picture and sometimes even recognise which piece is being played. Yet you have to present the excerpt in the exact same way as you would play it in an orchestra. So, the player must have all of the other parts of the different instruments that are playing at the same time in their head in order to phrase well, play in the correct steady tempo etc. Also, in the orchestra one does not play the same way as one

would when playing solo music. You have to remember that you are part of a group and should always melt into the sound of the others. There is a saying in the string sections: “you should never play louder than the person next to you”. Some passages that are written into the parts of orchestral music are actually not possible or not meant to be played out perfectly, sometimes it’s just an effect that works when the entire section plays it together. But often in auditions we are expected to play these passages alone and play them well.

When performing an excerpt at an audition there are so many things expected from you: the basic hygiene of your instrument (nice tone, good intonation, precise rhythm, crisp articulation), knowing what everyone else is playing in order to play musically, not playing too musically though because excerpts are not solo pieces, yet you still have to have an x-factor to stand out. So in short: play perfectly and interestingly but not too much.

Another difficulty with excerpts is that at least string players spend most of their time at school studying solo and chamber music. Yes, it is crucial to play well in general in order to win a job. But many students only start working on orchestral excerpts for the first time when it’s time for them to start doing auditions, so we are not used to playing them, especially for a jury.

3. Method

I have selected five different orchestral excerpts that I am going to record in three different situations: in the class room playing by myself, at a mock audition playing for friends and at the real audition in front of a professional jury. I will then analyse them and rate their performance quality, as well as how I felt playing them. I will try to measure the quality in percentage to best be able to compare how I did. In order to achieve a better result when performing I will explore different methods of practicing. I want both my body and mind to know exactly what they are doing to make the task of playing a full-body experience that I can enjoy. It will help me feel like I have a deep knowledge of the music, so that in the performance I would reach the full 100% capacity of what I am able to achieve in the practice room, without stage fright reducing that percentage. This will include mental training, mindfulness practices like yoga and meditation, different techniques of practicing, as well as strategies on the stage. This research will be largely based on every-day reflections, struggles and ideas from my practicing journal.

4. Mindfulness

The Cambridge Dictionary describes the word ‘mindfulness’ as “the practice of being aware of your body, mind, and feelings in the present moment.”² You have probably heard this word recently. Mindfulness is a relatively new concept that in itself is ancient but has gained a lot of popularity during the recent years together with other health practices such as yoga and meditation. Being mindful or in other words being totally in the moment is really something people should strive for in every task in their lives but in our modern world is not easy to achieve. Yet for some reason when one is on the stage being in the moment comes more naturally. The adrenaline makes you notice each sound, movement and feeling. Your mind is completely alert. I have come to realise that being able to take advantage of the alertness that adrenaline naturally brings out when performing, instead of fearing it will result in exceptional freedom in your performance. It makes you able to be in control of each moment and enjoy the energy between you and the audience, rather than trying to imagine they are not there. The same feeling of being present is something that we should transfer into our practising to not feel that being on the stage sets us in a foreign state of mind. Being on the stage should feel as close as possible to being in the practice room and vice versa.

My wonderful teacher prof. Cecilia Zilliacus has often told me that if I am presented with a task that demands heightened awareness such as technical exercises or a tricky passage, I somehow distance myself from the endeavour, rather than being even more active. I tend to put myself in the role of the observer and hope my hands will do the work for me because I have put in the hours and assume that the problems should be fixed now and the playing should come automatically. However usually I do not succeed in playing difficult parts with that attitude. My teacher says she knows even before I play my first note if I am going to nail the passage or not. This is because she sees I am not preparing my brain for being absolutely present for the task. But if I follow her advice and give more and more energy the more difficult the segment is, it ends up being even better than in the practice room.

One could also say giving energy means giving attention. Where and when you shift your attention is what makes the difference. But in order to give every note the attention it needs, you have to be able to be present at all times. That requires deep concentration that unfortunately is a limited

² Cambridge Dictionary, ‘Definition of mindfulness’, 2019, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/mindfulness> (accessed 29.05.2019).

resource. Nowadays, at the age of the smartphone the attention span of people is very short. Microsoft did a consumer research in 2015 that showed that the average attention span of a person in the year 2000 was 12 seconds but by 2013 it had reduced to 8 seconds. The attention span of a goldfish is 9 seconds in case you were wondering.³ So considering classical music repertoire one probably needs to concentrate for more than 8 seconds at a time. Of course it's not humanly possible to be present from the beginning to the end in one go during an entire piece. This is where mindfulness practices come in. Meditation and yoga are all about concentrating on one thing and when your mind wanders which it tends to do, gently bringing your attention back to it. So instead of panicking on the stage when you feel like you are not really present in the music anymore, one has to learn to bring one's attention back. Same thing applies in the practice room - in order to waste as little time as possible one should play with as much attention to each movement and sound as possible. This is something I will try to train with mindfulness techniques such as yoga and meditation.

4.1. Yoga

My experiences with yoga started a bit before I began writing this research. I have always been flexible and ever since I started to practice a lot I really felt that I needed to stretch more often, so deep stretching has been a part of my daily routine for many years. I had always wondered about yoga but I figured it was something that you couldn't really do at home because you need to learn the poses first, otherwise you do it "the wrong way" and don't benefit from it. As time went by I became more curious and decided to give it a shot, so I googled "yoga for beginners" and found literally thousands of free lessons on YouTube. At first I felt like I had assumed correctly because I didn't understand anything I had to do and felt insecure with all my movements, so I didn't want to continue. Then some time went by and I felt the need to pick it up again. This time I found an amazing YouTube channel⁴ (Yoga With Adriene) with a teacher who gives out good advice as well as good lessons and one of her mantras is "do what feels good." It doesn't matter if you are doing it "right" just listen to your body. By now I do some sort of yoga at least once a day, usually twice

³ A. Gausby, 'Attention spans', Microsoft Canada Consumer Insights, 2015, <http://dl.motamem.org/microsoft-attention-spans-research-report.pdf> (accessed 01.05.19).

⁴ A. Mishler, 'Yoga With Adriene', *YouTube* [YouTube channel], 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFKE7WVJfvaHW5q283SxchA> (accessed 06.05.2019).

because I enjoy it so much. Yoga has helped me listen to my body, connect it to the brain and through that create a full-body experience. The benefits to my violin playing first manifested themselves through being aware of the tensions in my body while playing. For example even though I tried to always keep my hands as free as possible, I had never noticed that my hips were very tense. When I loosened the hips the whole body felt different and more in sync, letting the energy flow freely. Then I noticed the same thing about my neck - when you hold the violin with your chin, turning your head to the left you put a lot of tension on your neck. When I tried to hold my neck as straight as possible and just let the collar bone and the weight of the head hold up my instrument I immediately felt more flexible in my upper body when playing. Through yoga I began to notice how different body parts affect each other and see my body as a whole.

4.1.1. Full-body experience

Yoga is the art of making each movement into a full-body experience. I came to realise more and more that every note, every exercise should be just that - a whole mind and body experience. It's like some kind of magic because it helps immediately with all sorts of problems if you just focus on being there with your entire body and your brain, no matter the occasion. For example if I'm practicing bow changes at the frog and tip of the bow which is often my first warm up exercise, I should still feel like the notes are flowing through my entire body, even though I am doing the exercise to focus on a very detailed mechanical movement in just the one hand. Usually working on small technical bits of a piece meant that I would close off to try be as focused as possible on the one detail. Now I've realised I should do the opposite and really open up my body the more focused I want to be. It feels as if when you relax your entire body you create a space where the music can go through, there is nothing blocking your energy. In playing an instrument, the arm (including the hand) functions both as a system of levers and as a conduit for visceral energy. It carries the charge of emotions and hormones from you into your instrument. Therefore, for both good leverage and musical expressiveness, this elegant route from torso to fingertip must be free of unnecessary tension. Shoulder, elbow and wrist must be efficiently positioned and sufficiently loose for energy to flow through freely.⁵ Yoga creates the same sort of natural energy flow in the body as music and being able to recognise that in your playing will aid in finding a flow in practice and performance. It

⁵ M. Bruser, *The Art of Practicing*, New York, Bell Tower, 1997, p. 75.

helps you feel that every note is going through your body which makes it a lot easier for the brain to give each part the attention it needs.

4.2. Meditation

Meditation can be challenging for beginners. It certainly takes time to allow yourself to be human and not get frustrated by not being very good at it at first. You have to learn to be kind and understanding to yourself. The idea is to give your mind a task - most often it's to concentrate on your breathing - and try to keep your concentration. But as I mentioned earlier the average attention span of a person is about 8 seconds, so your mind tends to wander off. When that happens you should not get frustrated or angry with yourself but just try to recognise that it happened and gently direct your attention back to your breathing. This is exactly what happens on the stage: the adrenaline makes your mind incredibly aware of everything and it seems as if your brain is hyperactive so it can be difficult to keep your concentration on what you are doing. Instead you can start worrying, analysing your playing or thinking about your dinner plans. Then you notice it has happened and panic strikes. In this case what you need to do is not worry about the lapse of concentration but just gently get back into what you are doing.

I started exploring guided meditation about two years ago. There are many different applications one can download to their phone and really meditate anywhere. The first lessons are only five minutes long but as a beginner it's hard to even keep up the concentration for that amount of time. I started taking these mini-breaks in the afternoon when I felt too tired to go on practising productively and really felt I needed a nap but had no possibility for that. So instead I found a comfortable seat in a dark room and tried to meditate using my app. It was not easy at first but I was surprised that even after the first few sessions I felt it offered a sort of a restart to the brain. It feels as it arranges your scattered thoughts and gives you some extra clarity to be productive a little while longer, even when you felt very tired already. I did this a couple of times a week for about a month until I actually moved so close to school I could start taking afternoon naps instead.

After that I substituted my meditation time with yoga which in itself is also a form of meditation. But after I while I started to miss the element of neatly arranging my thoughts and clearing space for work in the brain so to speak before practising. That's when I discovered that doing a quick

body-scan before every practising session is really beneficial to one's concentration. A body-scan is a well known meditation technique that I will explain in the next chapter.

I have practised some form or other of meditation now for the duration of the time I have been writing this study. I've found that in addition to the necessity of training your attention span, this basic knowledge that it is okay to wander off has helped me feel much calmer on the stage. It is important to feel centred before stepping into the spotlight and incorporating some form of a meditation exercise in your daily practice helps you find that feeling when you need it.

5. Mental training

Before beginning to write about mental training I found several researches that proved the necessity of it in a musician's or athlete's everyday practice. Most of these were based on visualisation of the end-result, like for example visualising the goal in sports or playing through your piece in your head and imagining giving a great concert in music. I did not however find research that would concentrate on the process of training/practising itself that would have been helpful to me as a violinist and therefore would have eliminated the need to explore this further myself.

I have based this study mostly on information from sports psychology. Largely because there is not as much information available on music psychology and also because the learning context of the two is surprisingly very similar. People 'play' sports and 'play' music, yet both involve hard work and discipline. Both are forms of self-expression which require a balance of spontaneity and structure, technique and inspiration. Both demand a degree of mastery over the human body, and yield immediately apparent results which can give timely feedback to the performer. Since both sports and music are commonly performed in front of an audience, they also provide an opportunity for sharing the enjoyment of excellence, as well as the experience of pressures and fears.⁶

⁶ B. Green and W.T. Gallwey, *The Inner Game of Music*, London, Pan Books, 2015, p. 7.

Research shows that although the brain is not actually a muscle, in many ways it acts like one—it changes and gets stronger when you use it.⁷ When you practice and learn new things, parts of your brain change and get larger, a lot like muscles do when you exercise. Just like in strength training the key to growing the brain is consistent practice. Mental training in music should be something you incorporate into your daily practice, even if it's just for 5-10 minutes. A theory called symbolic learning theory says that every move we make in life is first coded like a blueprint in our minds and in our nervous systems, so that if we mentally rehearse an event, we are actually blueprinting each move, making the gestures symbolic and making them more familiar to our body chemistry. By doing lots of mental practice, we are setting the stage for movement to become more automatic and easy to recall.⁸ It has been proven in several researches that mental training is an important part of general training and will lead to better results or similar results as regular practice in less time.^{9,10,11}

The psychological literature on mental rehearsal suggests that there are two important key aspects to keep in mind when engaging in mental practicing — that it be systematic and vivid. In other words, mental practice is not the same as daydreaming, in the same way that practicing on autopilot is not very helpful. To be effective, it must be structured just as actual practice, with self-evaluation, problem solving, and correction of mistakes.¹²

⁷ Mindset Works, Inc, 'You can grow your intelligence', 2015, <https://www.mindsetworks.com/websitemedia/youcangrowyourintelligence.pdf> (accessed 30/03/19).

⁸ S. Ungerleider, *Mental Training for Peak Performance*, New York, Holtzbrinck Publishers, 2005, p. 6.

⁹ S. Ungerleider, *Mental Training for Peak Performance*, New York, Holtzbrinck Publishers, 2005, p. 14.

¹⁰ N. F. Bernardi, A. Schories, H.C. Jabusch, B. Colombo and E. Altenmüller, 'Mental Practice in Music Memorization: An Ecological-Empirical Study,' *Music Perception*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2013, p. 275-290, <https://ego.psych.mcgill.ca/labs/mcl/pdf/nicolo2.pdf> (accessed 30.03.19).

¹¹ J. Selk, *10-Minute Toughness*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 2009, p. 1.

¹² N. Kageyama, 'Does Mental Practice Work?', *Bulletproof Musician* [web blog], <https://bulletproofmusician.com/does-mental-practice-work/> (accessed 03.03.2018).

Throughout the time I have spent with this research I have created my own guideline in how to incorporate mindfulness and mental training into my daily practice routine. It is how I do it, inspired by the great book *The Art of Practicing* by Madeline Bruser¹³ and *The Bulletproof Musician* blog¹⁴:

1. Warm up your muscles

For many years now I have found myself not being able to start my day properly before giving the main muscles of the body a good stretch or even sneaking in a short yoga session before breakfast. It's incredible that for all this time I hadn't realised that I should be doing the same thing with the specific muscles I use for playing before I pick up my violin. When searching for stretching tips for musicians on YouTube I found the perfect warm-up exercise sequence for me created by yoga teacher and violinist Elena Urioste.¹⁵ Stretching my shoulders, wrists, forearms and fingers really helps me feel more comfortable with my instrument when picking it up the first time that day and actually makes the warm-up time necessary to feel good on the instrument shorter.

2. Calm down

Madeline Bruser writes about the interesting fact of how we treat the event of practicing so differently than the event of performing. You would never come to a performance at the very last minute with half a sandwich still unfinished in your hand after spending the last 30 minutes stressed in traffic. Yet since practicing is such a mundane activity we don't tend to take the time to prepare our mind for it, empty it from clutter and really calm down to concentrate on what we are about to do. For getting into the mindset of being present I do the following mini-meditation exercise that only takes a few minutes but has a huge impact:

¹³ M. Bruser, *The Art of Practicing*, New York, Bell Tower, 1997.

¹⁴ N. Kageyama, 'Does Mental Practice Work?', *Bulletproof Musician* [web blog], <https://bulletproofmusician.com/does-mental-practice-work/> (accessed 03.03.2018).

¹⁵ E. Urioste, 'Warm-Up Elena Urioste', *Youtube* [online video], 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oe4rmsNONPO> (accessed 30.03.2019).

Sit in a chair with your back straight, head slightly tilted down in a natural position. Focus only on your breathing for a couple of cycles of breath. Breathe in slowly and fully through your nose, then breathe slowly out through your mouth. With each breath out feel your body relax, shoulders sink down, jaw unclench. Then do a total body scan for tension: check your head and facial muscles, your jaw, neck, shoulders, arms, wrists, hands, fingers back, hips, quads, hamstrings, calves, ankles, even toes. Let any tension you find just melt away.

3. Expand your focus

When we are on stage we are in a state where we're suddenly aware of every detail around us: the audience, the stage light shining in our eye, how our fellow musicians are tapping their foot on the floor, how our shirt is pinching our side etc. But in the practice room we tend to not notice anything but our playing since there is no adrenaline. With the body-scan exercise we are just focusing on our breath and the specific body part. Now try to expand your focus to the room. Keep paying attention to your breathing but notice where you are in the room, feel the space between the walls, the ceiling and the floor, notice the music stand, the mirror. Try to keep that attention for just a minute while being very aware of your breathing.

4. Be present in your warmup/warm up being present

No matter what you use for warming up, be present in the activity. For example I often warm up with bow changing exercises on scales in different parts of the bow, repeating each note change several times. It's easy to turn on autopilot after a while but it's crucial in these very detailed exercises to stay present. The brain has to prepare each movement and each note has to go through the body, no sound is insignificant. I find that when I do a good job at concentrating in my warm up my following practice session also has higher quality because I am also warming up my attention to detail.

5. Be present in your practice

The most obvious yet the most difficult part - being present when practicing. We are all trying to get the most out of the time we are putting in. I've found everyone understands and describes mindfulness in practice differently. I would put it this way: being mindful in my practice means

being totally aware of every sound and movement I make and being as constructive in as little time as possible, not letting anything slide, always asking *why*. But it is not easy figuring out how to get to a more mindful practice. A good trick I have discovered to find the mindfulness your way is to pick a segment you are going to work on and set the timer to 10 minutes, knowing you only have that limited amount of time for that place and you will not touch that segment again that day. It's amazing how many new things we start hearing and how little time we are wasting if we make productivity our priority. Keeping this level of concentration is very hard work, I managed to only do the 10 minutes and no more the first time I tried to be completely and utterly present. Of course usually there are deadlines you need to meet and a lot of repertoire you need to go through in one day but don't give up because you feel like you are not capable of practising "the right way" all the time. Just incorporate these 10 minutes a day of mindful practice and sooner than you think this mindful attitude will take over your work in the practice room.

6. Practicing techniques

In this section I will address a few techniques I have either come across or invented during my practicing sessions that I feel have had the strongest positive result.

6.1. Using the head more than the body

The body needs some time to adjust to new sensations but not nearly as much as we are offering it. When you are just punching in your time card and practising as much as your body physically can (which is usually way more than your brain can), waiting for things to improve just because of the hours you put in, you are actually wasting a lot of time and energy. Try to solve problems in your mind instead. When you have a difficult passage you are struggling with, that normal practicing methods haven't solved, try to imagine playing that as detailed as possible in your head. You will notice that you are having the same problems in your brain as when you actually play it. Use the same methods you would when physically practicing to try and solve the issues, small segments at a

time but do all the work with your imagination. Really feel each finger sink into the string with each note and at the same time feel the string under your bow vibrate, notice which direction you are going with the bow, decide and picture the bow distribution, hear the desired sound and feel that warm fuzzy feeling when something is perfectly in tune and in control. Pick a tempo where you can imagine all of these sensations, don't go any faster before you are really comfortable, you can use a metronome. This tempo can be absurdly slow at first and that is okay because it is necessary to do it properly. Then when you have reached the desired tempo or you are just really exhausted from the mental work, try it out on the instrument, keeping the same images in your head while you are playing. You won't always be able to play the segment perfectly then and there because we do need time for the body to understand the signals from the brain and muscle memory shouldn't be understated either, but in my experience this is the key to solving most of the issues.

A few examples on how I used the brain to overcome something I wasn't able to crack without figuring out an alternative way to tackle it:

Example nr 1:

Excerpt from the II violin part of Arnold Schönberg's Chamber Symphony No.1 Op.9



This is a difficult excerpt. It's hard for both the left and right hand: difficult to intonate and a lot of string crossings for the bow. It's very fast and your articulation has to be on point. The most challenging part of the excerpt begins 3,5 bars before rehearsal number 76 and ends at one bar before 76. Very fast, loud and aggressive with the left hand alternating between 3rd, 4th and 5th position and the bow hand playing on all the four strings one at a time. I prepared this excerpt for the same audition last year as well, so I had experiences with it already. The first time I learned it I must have practised this segment a thousand times. I played it slowly, slightly under tempo, in tempo, over tempo, only with the right hand, only with the left hand. Still, every time I tried to play

it “for real” it didn’t go so great. I didn’t get a chance to play it at the audition but I imagine it wouldn’t have magically been great there either. What I understand now is that first of all, by playing it so much before I had actually been able to solve the issue, I was just practising in the uncomfortable feeling and wrong reflexes. Secondly I did a lot of practising for the sake of practising. I have realised now that practising should, depending on what you are doing, actually mean slow-motion performing or segment performing. It’s much more time consuming to take something out of its context, perfect it and then try to put it back in, rather than keep the context but just play that small segment and slowly add to that (add notes before and after the problematic spot, add tempo). By doing that you get to skip a lot of steps. Thirdly I used only my body to practise it. This sounds weird because obviously I did approach it intellectually by observing myself and trying all those different practice hacks but I didn’t actually solve the issue in my brain. For me the problem was synchronisation between the hands and being aware of which string to play on when. When I practised this passage now I tried to feel utterly comfortable and secure in my head first, imagining exactly which finger I use and where the bow is at that time, feeling the string underneath the finger vibrate when I played on it with my imaginary bow. I tend to play the left hand in my head but wave my bow hand around a bit to have some sort of centre and feel the hand playing fluidly. The work I did on this excerpt the year before probably both helped me and didn’t. It helped to know the music and have some reflexes in the body but many of them were actually not beneficial and created tension that needed to be very consciously worked out. I might have avoided that tension in the first place, had I used mental training.

Example nr 2:

Excerpt from the II violin part of W.A.Mozart's Symphony nr 39 in E-Flat Major K.543: IV Finale



This excerpt is notoriously difficult and can be found in almost every orchestral audition list. I am sure all violinists agree that the most challenging part is bar 22-23. It needs some extra attention on the coordination of the hands and tends to get away from you when you are nervous. This is also an excerpt that I have studied before, in fact I have prepared this for an audition for four times. The mentioned bars have always made me feel insecure and haven't actually worked when under pressure. As with the Schönberg excerpt, I had practiced this place countless times in different rhythms, articulations, tempos etc. This time when I prepared it I applied the same kind of mental training technique to this entire excerpt. I tried to play the entire thing in my head with a metronome set to a tempo where I can follow this feeling of the string vibrating under my fingers and the direction of the bow completely. To my surprise the tempo that I could manage this in was about 1/3 of the actual tempo. It was surprising because I have been familiar with this excerpt for two years and I thought I was at a better place with it than that. The fact was that again I had taught my body what to do through countless repetitions but not my brain. When you use the metronome in a way where you gradually add tempo the more comfortable you get, you have to remember that it is the brain you are training to respond faster and faster, not the fingers. So I tried to get bar 22-23 up to tempo in my head but then realised that this way of practising also has its limits. I couldn't get past a certain tempo because I felt I just don't have the capacity to think that fast. When I then tried to play the passage in tempo, it wasn't perfect but it was better than ever. Once you are completely aware of what you should be doing in your head, your body will have the right reflexes at the right time, even when the tempo is so fast that you can't really follow every single 16th note. But the passage still wasn't completely comfortable. I realised I needed some time to take in this new knowledge that my brain had acquired and renew the links between my mind and the old reflexes in my body. I have to say I didn't quite manage to nail this excerpt with the time I had but by the time of the audition, this segment that was once an unsolvable source of fear was one I was least worried about and that is saying something.

6.2. Putting music first

I have always believed that violin playing has two major parts: technique and music making. From the Russian school it has been drilled into my head that you have to practice technique in order to be able to make music. When learning in Sweden I have experienced that technical spots are also just notes, they are also music. This seems obvious but hearing something and actually understanding it to the bone are two different things. When you encounter for example a 10-bar succession of octaves or fast 16th notes you shouldn't see it as a technical issue and exclude it from the melodic "music making part". This also carries the melody and music, just shaped as octaves or moving faster than the part before. And you should start off practicing it exactly as you would a slow and melodic passage, not just performing boring technical exercises and switching into "practising mode". Of course you will have to also apply the tricks and exercises one uses to solve these passages technically but it will move along much quicker if you start off by thinking of it as just music and prioritising keeping it in the context it belongs in and always, no matter what, listening for the desired tone quality.

6.3. Being goal-oriented

The first associate concertmaster of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Nathan Cole talks a lot about being goal-oriented in your practising sessions in his YouTube lessons.¹⁶ Setting a goal to each session gives you a time limit on a certain task and therefore makes you more efficient. Practising just to reach a certain amount of hours that you can check off is really not beneficial as I have also come to understand. There is such a thing as practising too much - if your head is not in the game anymore it is better to stop playing than to practice mindlessly and aimlessly. You can actually reverse the work you have put in when practising without being present because then it's easy to train in mistakes and tension. When I first heard about setting goals for your practice I thought that I was doing well on that front, I do set a goal every day - my goal is to be able to play the piece I am practising very well. But that is just not realistic to achieve in a day or in a week. Having unrealistic goals makes you feel like you lost the battle between yourself and your work each day. Setting small but achievable goals though makes you feel like a winner every day. And if you are going on

¹⁶ N. Cole, 'Nathan Cole', *YouTube* [YouTube channel], 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/user/natesviolin> (accessed 06.05.2019).

stage to perform something, you really should feel like a winner, not someone who is not sure if they can actually pull it off.

Some examples of the goals I would now set myself during a two-hour practice session:

- select about one to three tricky passages and try to be able to play them in a tempo that I have selected for that day (well below the end tempo) so that they feel good and that I know exactly what I am doing with my brain and my hands,
- go through a piece or a part of it with the sole intention of finding different phrasing (never forgetting the tone quality), often without vibrato in the left hand to make the tasks clear for the bow,
- play through a piece or an entire program in front of a recording device, analyse the recording and find the key problems and strategies for solving them. Often it could just be a matter of changing one's thinking so then I play and record it again directly and listen.

I usually do some technical and meditation exercises before each practice session as well. It's also extremely important to take a small break every 20-30 minutes and rest your body and mind in order to achieve maximum productivity.

7. Strategies on the stage

There is a lot you can do in the practice room to feel more comfortable on the stage but sometimes your nerves still get the best of you and you can't enjoy the performance. For that purpose I tried out some strategies that you could use when already on the stage.

7.1. Expanding your nervousness

Olympic gold medallist Bruce Jenner used to interpret increased heartbeat, muscle tremor, rapid breathing, increased sweating, and a need to urinate just before the decathlon as a sign that he was nervous, excessively aroused, and wasn't going to do well. These thoughts inevitably led to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Over time, he reframed those feelings and thoughts and told himself that he was ready, prepared both physically and psychologically, and that those symptoms were a sign of readiness and positive signals to compete. The result? An Olympic gold in the decathlon in 1976.¹⁷

Following the lead of Bruce Jenner I tried the method of making myself believe the symptoms of anxiety were a positive thing that meant my body was ready to perform and this nervousness or adrenaline would help me achieve even better results than in the practice room. I tried expanding my nervousness and accepting it, even inviting it instead of fighting against it. I have to say when I succeeded in convincing myself, the difference was huge. Just by telling my brain to interpret these sensations in a positive way the physical symptoms also changed: feeling sick to my stomach before going on stage was replaced with the good sort of butterflies; instead of the usual cold and stiff hands created by stage fright I felt the blood flowing and pulsating in my limbs creating a warm and flexible feeling; feeling out of control was replaced with being in the moment and observing myself play. It is not a magic fix for stage fright but often it does help and I just get less nervous because "being nervous" is not such a terrible thing I have to avoid at all costs anymore.

¹⁷ S. Ungerleider, *Mental Training for Peak Performance*, New York, Holtzbrinck Publishers, 2005, p. 21.

7.2. Opening up to the audience

Another strategy I have come across from a masterclass on YouTube with the Nordic violinist Henning Kraggerud¹⁸ is to be opened to the audience and not close myself off to the world. I used to feel that the only way I could completely concentrate on stage was when playing a piece by heart with my eyes closed. This still works on some level when for example playing a particularly meditative fragment of a solo Bach sonata but in most cases when I have to play something virtuosic and/or together with someone it is the worst thing I could do. I close off my energy from other people and go inside myself that leads to lapses in concentration and thoughts that disturb my performance. I used to imagine the audience wasn't there to not feel so nervous but it is much more efficient to communicate with the audience and your fellow musicians instead and through that have yet another thing to do besides thinking of how uncomfortable you eventually feel. The shift in energy is also noticeable, it becomes much easier to really express yourself and give something forward.

¹⁸ H. Kraggerud, 'Menuhin Competition 2018, Masterclass Henning Kraggerud', *Youtube* [online video], Menuhin Competition, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fr6WB1xZuo4> (accessed 20.02.19).

8. Result

8.1. Recordings

With this artistic research I have included 15 recordings. I have taken five excerpts and recorded each of them three times: in the practice room, at a mock audition playing for friends and at the audition in Västerås in March 2019. I will compare these now at the end of my research and see how much performing anxiety affects my playing in different situations after applying different techniques to my preparation. Due to the fact that there has been two months between the recording process and this reflection I have more perspective and can comment on it more objectively. I will also be rating the excerpts 1-5 by how difficult they seemed to me when starting work with them and by how confident I was about them by the time of the audition (with 1 being the least difficult/least confident and 5 the most).

1) Arnold Schönberg Chamber Symphony No.1 Op. 9

Difficulty: 3

Confidence: 4

Practice room [Audio file: Track 01 - Schönberg 1]

It's a solid version. I can hear myself trying not to rush which means I am grasping for control and that means I am not that musical in the piece but everything is correct and I was happy with that performance. I don't hear myself breathe so much so I probably could have had more flexibility in the body and a better presence before each entrance. At that moment I felt that was my best take and the 100% I could give.

Mock audition [Audio file: Track 02 - Schönberg 2]

Definitely the best version. I do excellent phrasing and even manage to get a nice *spiccato* sound in the first quiet segments. There is a tendency to rush at some places but the musicality of my playing helps with that and evens it out in the big picture. It sounds better than trying to control my playing and keeping a steady tempo. The excerpt feels free and fluid. I remember feeling it was okay but

that there was a lot of work still to be done. However now I think it was excellent and I should have just tried to play it even more musically at the audition to not rush over some notes and it would have been perfect. If my practice room version was a 100% of what I thought I could do, this is probably 120%.

Audition [Audio file: Track 03 - Schönberg 3]

I am rushing from the very beginning. The phrasing is quite nice and I am breathing a lot so I am present. I remember feeling that I was very concentrated and it went well. This excerpt was in the first round and I got to the second round of the audition so it did go well. I would say compared to my practice room take this is about 97%.

2) W. A. Mozart Symphony No.39 in E-Flat Major K.543: IV Finale

Difficulty: 5

Confidence: 1

Practice room [Audio file: Track 04 - Mozart 1]

I tried to get a good recording of this excerpt one day before the audition. It was one of the excerpts I was least sure about and I thought it would give me confidence to see that I am actually able to play it well. This was a wrong move. It took me a few takes to realise it was getting worse and worse and at the end of what was probably my seventh take I was absolutely devastated about my whole playing because I couldn't get through this excerpt not even once without really apparent mistakes. I had performed this a week before to a friend and that had gone pretty well so I will instead include a recording from that day and call that my 100%. There was room for improvement sound-wise and I tended to brush over some notes but I had a steady tempo and everything worked out well. If I compare my practice room takes the day before the audition to that version I would give them about 70%. I was trying to be in control but it was instead making me stuck so even the usually comfortable parts felt tense and awkward. That made all of the elements worse and added up to a pretty bad performance that I was struggling to finish.

Mock audition [Audio file: Track 05 - Mozart 2]

The tempo I chose was much faster than in my 100% take. I was quite flexible in my playing and it sounded musical enough but I still rushed a lot in the more difficult places and that led to a bit of panic but I managed to pull through and get a decent version. All in all this was about 94%.

Audition [Audio file: Track 06 - Mozart 3]

The tempo was now insanely fast. I played the excerpt in 35 seconds and the first take was 40 - a whole 5 seconds longer. So my tendency to rush really took over and didn't really give me a chance. Everything I tended to do when in the practice room was doubled and the places where I usually rushed a bit, at the audition I skyrocketed. The amazing part is though that even in this superhuman tempo I managed to finish the excerpt without any wrong or missing notes. The next time I have to prepare this excerpt I will concentrate on finding the music in the phrases to stay in tempo and keep my cool because I think that will solve most of my problems. This time the score was about 70%.

3) B. Bartok Music For Strings, Percussion And Celesta, Sz. 106: II Allegro

Difficulty: 4

Confidence: 2

Practice room [Audio file: Track 07 - Bartok 1]

Good version, steady tempo and I can hear I am really preparing each entrance.

Mock audition [Audio file: Track 08 - Bartok 2]

The tempo I start in is much faster but it works. I sound more free. There are some accidents in the coordination that result in a whistle. Overall I prefer this version to the practice room take. Very hard to compare these two takes percentage-wise because in the second version I had minor slip ups but in the first take I was lacking the flow that made it sound more organic and musical. I would say they are both equally good in different ways.

Audition [Audio file: Track 09 - Bartok 3]

I am clearly rushing from the very first bar. That leads to not feeling grounded and in control and I start brushing over some notes in difficult places which means I have tension at those segments. Even before those bits I am already worried and insecure, so I am setting myself up for failure because I know what is coming up is even more challenging. I can hear from my breathing and the amount of preparation that I give each entrance that I did have good concentration, so it's nice to know that when nerves kick in I do not lose my mind anymore, so to speak. It's just a shame that I, like so many of us, have the tendency to rush in that situation because for some reason we are afraid to take time when it's fight or flight. I think just focusing on phrasing and the importance of each note in the phrase will help to avoid these issues. I would give this take a score of 80%.

4) F. Mendelssohn Symphony No.4 in A major, Op. 90: I Allegro vivace

Difficulty: 2

Confidence: 3

Practice room [Audio file: Track 10 - Mendelssohn 1]

I hear that I am trying to control it, it is simply not flowing naturally. I am quite rhythmical and not skipping any notes which is good. There is one certain place that is prone to rushing and I do that a little bit. A solid take but not very beautiful musicianship-wise.

Mock audition [Audio file: Track 11 - Mendelssohn 2]

Again I take a much faster tempo than in the practice room, I think it throws me off because the end of the first phrase already is quite out of tune. Also the whistling sound occurs which means the coordination is not perfect. The place where I rushed before, I now rush a little bit more. It is not as musical as it could be but a lot more than in the practice room. I would say this is 90% compared to the practice room take.

Audition [Audio file: Track 12 - Mendelssohn 3]

Luckily I manage to take the same tempo as at the mock audition. It is in tune, even more so than the practice room take. There is a difficult bar in the first segment that requires extra attention on some tones to bring it out. I hear this time I am just rushing over it, which again means I was worried about it and tensed up. The infamous rushing place is indeed rushing a lot and this tendency continues after that. This take is less musical than the mock audition but more so than the practice room version. I would give this 80%.

5) M. Mussorgsky Pictures At An Exhibition: Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle

Difficulty: 1

Confidence: 5

Practice room [Audio file: Track 13 - Mussorgsky 1]

A little out of tune but musical. I did enjoy this excerpt the most in all situations because it highlighted my strongest suit - a big tone with an intense vibrato. This take has a bit of a shaky tone at some places, actually isn't great but I will call it a 100% anyway because I felt that way at that moment.

Mock audition [Audio file: Track 14 - Mussorgsky 2]

This version is quite a bit out of tune in several places. It is as musical but has bigger contrasts in dynamics which adds positive notes. The tone is deeper and more relaxed. Again it's hard to compare because both takes have their pros and cons. Let's call it even.

Audition [Audio file: Track 15 - Mussorgsky 3]

This felt great at the audition. I remember being really present and able to give out my deepest emotions to the jury even though I was behind a screen. I hear an intense and deep tone, it is almost entirely in tune, the most musical of the three takes. I would give this take a score of 130%.

8.1.1. Reflection

It is not unanticipated that my level of confidence with each excerpt is in direct connection with how difficult I perceive it be. It is probably so with most people. It's also expected that my performance quality was linked to how confident I felt about each excerpt. But to my surprise it seems that I played almost every excerpt better when performing than in the practice room. It is that little extra that the adrenaline gives you that makes it possible to really be present and when you have done the right kind of preparation, to seize the moment and use it for your advantage.

Apparently performance anxiety exaggerates everything you normally do in the practice room. If you are used to depicting a phrase a certain way, you will do it even brighter when on the stage, making a more musical performance. Unfortunately it also works against you if you have tension or tendencies to do the things you don't want to occur in your performance, like rushing or playing a certain note just a tad out of tune every time. Being on the stage almost puts a magnifying glass on your playing. This means that already in the practice room you have to be so much more aware of everything you want the audience to hear in your playing afterwards. Even the slightest insecurity or bad habit that doesn't really affect your playing quality in an apparent way when performing for yourself will likely become a source of tension or present itself as a bigger error than you would have imagined on the stage.

From these recordings I deduct that I usually played best at the mock audition. When performing for my family or friends I get that little bit of adrenaline that lifts my playing to a higher level and tests me at the same time but doesn't create too much tension. At the real deal though the amount of

adrenaline in my system makes every extra movement and doubt an obstacle. I think the solution might be to take that magnifying glass from my last performance with me to the practice room and iron out all the insecurities with different techniques that I have come across during this research until my confidence level when leaving the practice room is a “5” in each piece I have to perform.

From this experience of recording my entire audition preparation process I will take with me the feeling I had when listening to these recordings two months later. I remember feeling quite negative about my playing and how there was an endless mountain of work in front of me with an unreachable peak. Now listening to them objectively I hear that my level was a lot higher than I perceived it to be and I should have been more content with the work I was producing. In the future I am not going to strive for perfection during the last periods before the audition but try to keep a calm mind and pinpoint one or two areas that need the most attention and work on them mindfully.

8.2. Percentage

When I started the work on this research I was struggling heavily with performance anxiety. I felt that from the 100% of what I was able to produce in the practice room, my percentage when performing was at times as low as 20%. By now I have put myself in the most stressful situation for a musician - an audition for a job - and come out of it with the average percentage of 91,4%. That is an incredible difference. I am confident that this research has been the sole reason for the positive change in my performance quality because it has led me to go thoroughly into asking *why* and consciously making a difference in my every-day practice and lifestyle.

9. Discussion

The aim of this artistic research was to be able to perform five excerpts at the second violin audition in Västerås Simfonietta as close to the 100% of what I was able to do in the practice room as possible. I made subjective calculations about my performances and came up with the result that now when playing in public I am able to deliver on average 91,4% of what I am capable of. It is a far better result than what I could have dreamed of in the beginning of this research and I am extremely satisfied with how it went. My development as an artist is also proved by the fact that for the first time in two years and four auditions, I advanced to the second round in Västerås. I am incredibly thankful for this research project because it has transformed my playing and my relationship to practising to an astonishing level compared to where I was before I started writing.

It is difficult to say which technique has helped me the most. I am sure it is the combination of all of the different ways I enhanced my practice. At times one method leads to another and you cannot have one without the other. For example without yoga and meditation I wouldn't have the mental capacity to be able to incorporate mental practice into my everyday playing. I probably wouldn't have understood the level of concentration needed for it. Mental training is really putting meditation to use in a musical context. I feel I now get more done in less time in the practice room which is something that is the goal for anyone trying to advance in their work. Going on stage, while still a bit unnerving right before the performance, is now something that I have learned to enjoy and I feel that I am actually communicating with the audience through my playing. The whole process of making music has gotten in a way more real and significant to me because I am now embodying my whole being in it.

I encourage every musician who wants to give a more compelling performance and feel more relaxed on the stage to be curious about which steps to take to make a conscious difference. Often times it could feel like the answer lies somewhere in the abstract and there isn't much that we could take to our own hands except to just continue practising but that isn't entirely true. We should never stop asking *why* and *how*.

Even though I have been immersed in mental training and mindfulness for quite some time now and it has helped me a lot, old habits are quick to creep back into the practice. I will continue working

on incorporating more and more of these techniques into every area of my life and hope that with each performance my playing will become more enjoyable for both the audience and myself.

For further research I would like to go into how mental training can help memorise a piece. Playing by heart has lately become a bit of an obstacle for me and I am positive it could make the memorising process that a lot of musicians struggle with a lot easier. Performing without sheet music is all about the same ideas of leaning on the confidence in your work in the practice room when on stage, as is battling performance anxiety.

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