



CHOCOLATE FLOW PRACTICE FUN!

by Eve Newsome, 2016

WHAT IS FLOW?

Every musician knows what it is like to be in their practice room happily enjoying every moment of music making, never wanting it to end. During these moments, we forget about our everyday worries, our regrets about the past and our fears about what tomorrow will bring, and instead we are swept up in the glorious experience of being transported to another world of fluid feeling where only the music matters. We feel spontaneous and energised and the notes seem to flow out smoothly and effortlessly. These are the characteristics of 'being in the zone' where deep learning occurs through our full engagement with an activity.

On the other hand, we all know what it feels like to be uncomfortable and stressed in our practice room such that we feel like we are imprisoned in a world of futility and frustration. When this happens we know that we are heading down a negative track but we don't always know how to get back to the good feelings of flow again. Sometimes we can even become so negative that we might lose our desire to practice or become angry at ourselves thinking that somehow we are to blame for this predicament. At its worst, we may start to question our sense of identity as a musician.

So, what do all these experiences have to do with chocolate? In terms of understanding how the experience of goal setting for flow really works, the concept of chocolate is our greatest teacher! The chocolate flow method shows us that there is a way in which you can practice so that enjoyment and deep absorption occur, helping you to develop healthy and positive practice habits. This is something that every musician can learn, and the more you practice it, the more it will become part of your everyday routine.

HOW TO BEGIN:

The way to begin is by imagining that your practice session is represented by a large block of your favourite chocolate. The chocolate bar you imagine needs to have little squares in it which can be broken off the larger block, so that in the end there are lots of little squares. If you don't like chocolate, you can imagine a bowl of ripe, juicy berries that are ready to eat or something similar that you enjoy eating. Each square or berry will represent a symbolic reward for a small completed task undertaken in your practice session. By the end of your practice time you should have overcome so many little goals that your chocolate bar or bowl of berries is finished!

SET YOUR LARGE TASK FIRST AND THEN FOLLOW WITH YOUR FIRST SMALL, ACHIEVABLE SUB-GOAL:

Before you start your practice session, decide on the overall goal that you would like to accomplish. That helps you to establish a 'goal stack' where the larger goal can be broken down into a whole lot of small ones, just like the chocolate being broken into squares. Once you have decided on your overall goal, then begin with the most obvious, achievable sub goal. Make sure it is small and defined well enough that you can complete it in about five minutes with a feeling of accomplishment. Once completed it will be worth one symbolic square block of chocolate or a ripe berry! This is the foundation of how the chocolate method works: set a small, achievable goal (that relates to your overall goal), discover ways to overcome it and then joyfully reward yourself!

TOUCH, EASE, SOUND AND IMAGINATIVE EXPLORING

Now, as you begin to complete the small goals you have chosen, one at a time, focus on the sensations of creating music - the sense of touch and hearing such as the sensation of the vibration of the instrument as you create the texture and timbre of the sound. Be aware of all the subtle qualities of the movements you make and the sound you produce. As you do this, keep yourself relaxed by saying, *'Relax and enjoy the sound'* and asking, *'Am I relaxed enough to enjoy my sound?'* and *'What can I do to relax more into my sound?'* These are great starting points to help you become absorbed in the moment whilst reducing any negative thoughts or tension that you might be experiencing.

A relaxed body and calm mind are the keys to absorption, so if you become aware of too much physical tension or mental stress, take a deep breath through your nose and breathe out slowly through your mouth, repeating the process several times to let all the stress release out of your body. If you still feel tense, use your whole body in movements such as walking around the room, jumping up and down on the spot or doing star jumps to release the tension. Choose the movement that fits best with your energy levels.

Once you start to feel a more relaxed connection to your music making, choose any playful and imaginative focus point that connects with feeling, such as creating a personal story about the music or playing around and improvising with the notes to get a stronger feeling for the musical meaning. You can sing out loud to get the sense of the expression and phrasing and gesture physically to understand the musical energy. Be courageous to explore and have **fun** with your music! As soon as you feel a small sense of accomplishment, such as connection two notes the way you like to, or shaping a phrase according to your intentions ask yourself if your small goal has been completed. If so, then reward yourself immediately with an imaginary piece of chocolate or ripe strawberry and as you consider your accomplishment say to yourself 'Well done!' This helps you to consolidate the sense of relationship between clear goal setting and reward feelings and to recognise the significance of small steps in your musical journey.

IMPORTANT!

Remember that more than about 5 minutes without a sense of task completion can lead to frustration or boredom which may in turn lead you to lose motivation to practice. Make sure you keep setting small, achievable goals and check that they are not too challenging for you. Sometimes musicians can be perfectionists and want everything to be perfect immediately rather than allowing the natural learning process to occur. If this is how you feel, slow down, relax and smell the roses! Give yourself credit for small achievements and realise that over time small achievements lead to large ones.

If you identify many small goals, you can always write them down before you start your practice, but don't put pressure on yourself to get through your whole list. Let yourself learn at the pace that feels comfortable and fun for you. You will find that in any case as you become more absorbed in your task you will keep finding more and more things to explore and discover - this is the fun part! Let yourself go with the flow! Just make sure that your small goals keep providing a small incentive to draw you into the task whilst enabling you to remain optimistic that your reward (i.e. your chocolate!) will come *soon*.

THE TRICK

The trick with the chocolate flow method is to notice when even a *tiny* bit of boredom, frustration or tension appears, as these are signs of going down the road to disengagement and negativity. Turn back! Catch your negative feelings and bodily tension and go back to the chocolate square reward fun straight away. Relax yourself and set another small, achievable goal based on sensations and imagination to keep exploring your music.

WARNING!

Remember that whilst your chocolate bar may be large, it is *not* infinite - it cannot last all day! If your goals are small enough to be achievable in short time frames and you maintain the cycle of overcoming challenges and are symbolically rewarding yourself, your chocolate block or berry bowl should be finished in about 45 minutes. After that, you will need to take a break to refresh yourself by walking, deep breathing, stretching, drinking water and eating nutritious food. When you start your next practice session check your goal setting again and begin the next chocolate flow journey to joyful practice!

SUMMARY

1. Identify a large task for your practice session
2. Set a small, achievable goal within it
3. Overcome it with a sensory focus and playful approach
4. Reward yourself immediately!

(PS. Repeat until your large task is complete whilst remembering to take regular breaks)