

## The *FLOW* MUSIC METHOD

Optimal experience tips and strategies for musicians and music teachers  
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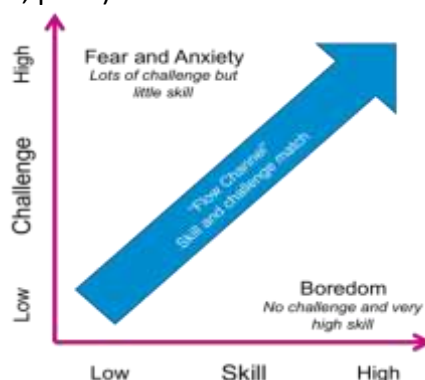
### Introduction: What is flow?

Everybody has experienced feelings of fulfilment, joy and absorption when actively engaged in an activity they love. In those moments we feel in control, our actions seem effortless and hours pass by in an instant. This experience of 'being in the zone' is what psychologists refer to as flow. It was first documented in a study by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in 1975 when he interviewed rock climbers, basketballers, composers, dancers and chess players. The participants all described a similar sensation of wanting to engage in the activity purely for the enjoyment of the experience. Through his ongoing research Csikszentmihalyi (1990) identified the main experiences common to all flow activities:

What makes these activities conducive to flow is that they were *designed* to make optimal experience easier to achieve. They have rules that require the learning of skills, they set up goals, they provide feedback, they make control possible. They facilitate concentration and involvement by making the activity as distinct as possible from the so-called "paramount reality" of everyday existence. (p.72)

### Balancing challenges and skills for flow

Subsequent findings confirmed that an important precursor to the flow experience is a fine balancing of a person's skills with the challenges involved. If a person feels that the challenges are too low relative to their skills then boredom is likely to result or if too high then frustration and anxiety can occur. If the challenges and skill levels are both low then they may become apathetic. However, when high challenges are matched with high skills so that they feel stretched then the deep involvement of the flow state can begin. Csikszentmihalyi discovered that every person had the ability to control the balance of their skills and challenges to experience more flow feelings showing that 'Each person can find her own balance appropriate to her present skill potential, and thus sets the scene for flow' (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, p. 17). (See below, Flow model based on Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 49)



## Introduction to the *Flow* Music Method tips

We know that musicians can become so deeply engrossed in their music that they lose a sense of themselves as being separate from the music - they literally 'lose themselves' in the music. In these moments everything seems to come together effortlessly and there is a sense of complete confidence and control - they know what to do. Interestingly, this transcendent feeling of flow is not brought on automatically by the body. The mind is also involved through attention to aspects such as goals, thoughts, motives and feelings. This is where the flow zone lies for musicians.

Building on the characteristics of the flow state I have designed a practical *Flow* Music Method (FMM) to help instrumental musicians attain this state and practice more effectively. The method provides a range of focus points drawn from information from flow studies, sports psychology and neuroscience that provide a unique perspective on practicing. In particular, the ground-breaking flow work of Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, Susan Jackson and Andreas Burkiz has provided both information and inspiration to assist me in the compilation of the tips and strategies I recommend for musicians.

In my role as a professional oboist and University music lecturer, I have been teaching the *Flow* Music Method for fifteen years to music students, teachers and professionals both internationally and within Australia. In recent years I have embarked in an in-depth PhD research study mapping the effectiveness of the *Flow* Music Method on the experiences and performance of tertiary music instrumentalists. The results to date have been extremely positive and I have used them to make subtle changes to the method in order to further increase its efficacy. The recently burgeoning area of neuroscience has supported the approach of my method and I believe that further discoveries in this area will be of great benefit to musicians in the future. In the years to come as my research unfolds, I envisage being able to contribute exciting new knowledge concerning how musicians promote flow feelings in their practice and exactly how this affects their experiences and performance outcomes.

This article represents the summary of all the information that I have drawn on to date and reveals the depth and variety of strategies that can be used to encourage musicians to consciously set up the conditions for flow during practice and performance. It is primarily based around creating an enjoyable practice experience through an awareness of kinesthetic, sensory and expressive focus points. You will notice I have used open questions to direct you to focus points that help you self-regulate towards positive experiences. I encourage you to make the most of the strategies in the *Flow* Music Method in a personalized way that works best for you and most importantly, to enjoy the process. As Csikszentmihalyi (1990) stated: 'Those who make the most of the potential for enjoyment inherent in music...have strategies for turning the experience into flow' (p.110).

## THE *FLOW* FEEDBACK LOOP. KNOWING WHAT TO DO



‘Goals direct action and provide focus.’ (Jackson et al., 1999, p.21)

When you practice music, you are involved in what can be called a self-regulated activity where all the decisions, goal selections and monitoring of progress are done on your own in the isolation of your practice room. Given that this is an unusual responsibility, it is recommended that you maintain a clear task focus and be aware of and reduce undesired periods of boredom and stress in order to optimize your experience. To increase the likelihood of flow experiences in your practice, you need to develop a keen awareness of goal-setting and be able to monitor how you progress in relation to the goals.

Increased awareness of this process can be achieved by actively pursuing clear, task-related, *achievable* goals and then focusing on the immediate kinesthetic, sensory and expressive feedback you receive as a result of your actions. In this way you can develop a stronger sense of what you are doing and how you are going from moment to moment. Consequently, you are more likely to avoid the confusion of having too many options to choose from or of having to wait a long time to see the results of your actions. Instead you can experience the deep clarity felt by an FMM student when they noticed that, ‘I knew what to do and I did it.’

When you set and overcome an achievable goal you should feel a sense of completion and success soon afterwards. This tells you that you have set the goal level at the ‘just-right’ point and you can then continue on to select the next ‘just-right’ goal and repeat the process. In this way a continuous loop of learning is created that feels engaging and enjoyable. In the *Flow* Music Method, this constant process of goal-oriented action and positive feedback is referred to as the *Flow* feedback loop. To maintain the loop you need to find the optimal level of control that feels right for yourself in **every** moment. This means that you need to know how to be at ‘the cutting edge of performance, where challenges and skills are fluid and apt to change’ (Jackson et al., 1999, p. 128).

Begin your goal-setting by identifying a large goal such as an important long-term career goal that is three to five years away and then break it down into mid-term and short-term goals that connect to it. Keep reducing the goals until you can plan the small sub-goals that you wish to achieve in your daily practice this week. It is important to write down your plan, so that you can keep track of it and alter it as you need to. Remember that during your practice sessions you may need to adjust your goals slightly in order to keep stretching your skills and developing your playing, so make sure you maintain a flexible attitude to your small goals. Remember to set fun challenges that you can look forward to, so that as an FMM student found, you will feel that, ‘Introducing challenges ...made it really enjoyable’.

The challenges will only be enjoyable if they are set at the ‘just-right’ level. An indicator that you have misjudged the level is when you experience apathy, boredom or stress. If you notice these

negative emotions, stop what you are doing and reset your goal. This is your chance to regain your positive focus by identifying a new 'just-right' goal and checking for the immediate *Flow* feedback loop signs of enjoyment and fulfilment.

The *Flow* Music Method provides specific focus points to help you maintain the *Flow* feedback loop so that you can keep setting small goals and feeling the sense of immediate reward that goes along with achieving them. The focus points are based on sensory immersion and playful, imaginative exploration and allow you to learn at your own pace by finding relevant and interesting challenges to overcome. As you do this, your practice can become a deeply absorbing and fun experience. One FMM student discovered the positive joy of using flow focus points observing that, 'Practising on that deeper level is really rewarding.'

To learn how to activate flow feelings regularly in your practice sessions, rehearsals and performances, begin with the *Flow* warm-up (Tips 1-3). When you practice solo repertoire and prepare ensemble parts during your practice use the *Flow* Repertoire Tips (Tips 4-10), and as you get closer to your performance day, check the *Flow* Pre-Performance tips and *Flow* Performance Tips (Tips 11-12). If you get stuck during your practice, look at the Troubleshooting Tips (Tips 13-14). I encourage you to use all the tips in a flexible way that suits you so that you can take charge of your practice and feel the engaging and enjoyable *Flow* of Music!

### *FLOW* WARM-UP (Tips 1-3)

***FLOW* TIP #1: CREATE AN OPTIMAL PRACTICE ENVIRONMENT.** Ask yourself: Is my practice space comfortable and practical? Can I reduce distractions?

To begin your *Flow* warm-up, check that your practice space is comfortable, practical and free of distractions. Keep everything you need close by and well organized so that it feels practical and easy to start your practice. Ask yourself: Is my practice space comfortable and practical?

Have a think about creating a regular practice schedule that you can get used to so that it becomes like a ritual and you always know when to start. This makes it easier to overcome procrastination and other obstacles that may prevent you from beginning your practice. Consider the time of day when your concentration is most optimal and use that as a guide for your scheduling. To avoid being distracted by clock-watching (or phone-watching!) during practice, set an alarm to remind you to finish. See what you can do to reduce any unwanted external noise, intruding visual stimuli and items such as furniture that may crowd your personal space. Check for distractions that prevent you from focusing by asking yourself: Can I reduce distractions?

**FLOW TIP #2: GET COMFORTABLE BEFORE PLAYING:** Ask yourself: Am I moving comfortably in a whole body way? Am I aware of my breathing? Do I feel relaxed in my practice space?

‘When the body is well-organised, the muscle tension is limited and the load for all actions is shared across the muscles, skeleton and connective tissue...and the sensation is of effortless action.’ (Doidge, 2007)

The body has its own knowledge - its own wisdom. When we allow it to function in harmony with itself then it has an increased capacity to act without strain, and learning can become easier. Relaxation has been found to be a pre requisite for optimal learning, so to allow this to happen, it is recommended that you start your practice by taking a couple of minutes to get comfortable and relaxed **before** you start to play. You can ask yourself questions about comfort to check how you are feeling and to focus your attention such as: **Do I feel relaxed in my practice space?** and **Am I aware of my breathing?** As a FMM student observed, ‘These [flow] questions centred my focus - allowed me to focus on certain things’.

Before beginning to play, move your body in a harmonious way by walking around your practice space *without* your instrument to get in touch with the feeling of your whole body. Ask yourself: **Am I moving comfortably in a whole body way?** At this time a focus on your breathing will help to relax you and bring you into the moment. As you feel the effortless action of walking and breathing, your normal ‘mind-chatter’ should reduce and you may begin to feel a deep sense of repose almost like meditation. To encourage this to happen, take the time to simply relax in your practice space, be aware of your body and the rest will follow naturally.

**FLOW TIP# 3: IMMERSE YOURSELF IN YOUR SENSES**

**TOUCH:** Ask yourself: What can I feel as I play? Can I feel every movement I make? Can I feel every note?

**EASE:** Ask yourself: Is it a comfortable feeling? Do I feel relaxed? Does it feel easy?

**SOUND:** Ask yourself: Am I aware of the overtones of my sound? Can I feel the vibrations and texture of my sound? Am I enjoying my sound? Can I hear the expression in my sound?

‘Each sensory organ, each motor function can be harnessed to the production of flow.’  
(Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p.95)

You can use your body to harness flow feelings in practice by remaining relaxed and focused. As you prepare to play your instrument, gradually slow down your walking and focus on a slow out breath. As you settle in to your practice position, maintain a gentle whole body movement, immersing yourself in the sensations of the comfortable body feeling that you have created in the *Flow* warm-up. Then begin by playing easy notes or an easy tune as you continue to gently move your body. Remember to resist the temptation to start your practice with difficult technical exercises or set material as that can put pressure and strain on you. Instead, just play any easy notes, and get comfortable with your instrument. At this time you don't need to think or follow a strict plan, just simply continue your *Flow* warm-up by feeling and listening while keeping your gentle body movement going. This helps to promote the feeling of connection with your instrument, as a FMM student discovered, 'When I move more...I can feel more and express more'.

Once you are comfortable, begin by asking yourself the Touch questions as you play such as: **What can I feel as I play?** and **Can I feel every movement I make?** These types of questions will encourage you to become aware of the subtleties of the touch sensation, and to notice any immediate kinesthetic and sensory feedback that results from it. When you focus on the places where your body touches the instrument in the production of the sound you will notice a solid sense of physical feedback. You can follow up by focusing on your comfort levels by asking yourself Ease questions such as: **Is it a comfortable feeling?** Finally you can attune your listening with the touch sensation by applying Sound questions such as: **Can I feel the vibrations of my sound?** and **Am I enjoying my sound?**

The Touch, Ease and Sound questions focus on the sensory results of your actions so your attention is placed on the sensory feedback you receive from your action, rather than on the action itself. If you immerse yourself in the sensory questions as you play easy tunes or simple patterns you are allowing your body to self-regulate naturally in response to the questions. This can really help you to focus at the start of your practice and eliminate distractions so that you 'can get into that place of really good concentration' (FMM student). As you do this you can find your own personalized comfort zone and the feelings of flow can begin. As you enter the sensory world of music and forget about your everyday worries, you might begin to notice that, 'flow is about feeling the notes.' (FMM student)

Once you have explored the Touch, Ease and Sound flow questions, see if you can identify one question that makes the most positive difference to you by helping you to become more focused and engaged with your sensory experience. You should be able to tell because in that moment your analytical thinking will become less dominant and your negative thoughts and worries will begin to dissipate. Your sense of connection to your instrument should increase and your actions become more effortless. Whilst in this state, your self-awareness will become very keen and your normal self-judging thoughts should reduce as your clarity of concentration improves. You may have an absorbing experience like that of a FMM student

and notice that, ‘...the feeling was so good that I was able to concentrate on the things that we were working on. So, so nice I’d do it again a hundred times’.

When you have identified a helpful Touch, Ease and Sound flow question (or questions) to apply, repeat it to yourself a few times to memorise it. You can then use it as your own *personal* KEY flow question/s to apply to your practice and performance every time you want to increase the sensory feedback quickly. This can make a big difference to your experience, as noted by a tertiary clarinetist... ‘The best point [of the Flow Music Method] for me was to get the key question where to start from for playing (in practice or on stage).’

### *FLOW* WITH REPERTOIRE (Tips 4 – 10)

***FLOW* TIP #4: SET CLEAR, ACHIEVABLE SUB-GOALS THAT ARE ‘JUST-RIGHT’:** Ask yourself: Have I set a ‘just-right’ goal? Am I having regular feelings of success?

After increasing your focus with the comfortable sensory immersion of the *Flow* warm-up, you can go on to apply your selected Key flow question/s from Touch, Ease and Sound to any music such as scales, studies, pieces or orchestral excerpts. Remember to select achievable ‘just-right’ goals that feel challenging but realistic for you and relate to your larger goals. The most suitable goals tend to be flexible ones where you can raise or lower the challenge level as you need to, to find the optimal level in every moment of your practice. Ask yourself: Have I set a ‘just-right’ goal? Some goals will take longer to achieve than others, however, a goal that cannot be achieved in one practice session can leave you feeling unsatisfied and consume your thoughts between practice sessions. Monitor your goal setting level by being aware of your progress from moment to moment through paying attention to the kinesthetic and sensory feedback. If you are experiencing regular feelings of success with your small goals, you will remain engaged and motivated as you move towards your larger goals. You will avoid the feeling of dissatisfaction that comes from straining to overcome goals that are too large. Check the ‘just-right’ level by asking yourself: Am I having *regular* feelings of success?

One of the traps that musicians sometimes fall into is trying too hard to get results. This can manifest itself through repetitious playing of technical exercises or passagework. If you find you are having this experience, you may notice that feelings of tension and frustration appear. It can be useful to be aware of these feelings as they indicate that you may have set a goal that is out of your reach or you need to develop more skills. To avoid over trying it is recommended that you set goals that stretch you only a *little* so that whilst you might feel that you are exerting yourself, there will be *no* sense of strain.

As you develop the habit of setting ‘just-right’ goals for yourself and being aware of the resulting sensory feedback, you will become subtly attuned to the way your own **personal** *Flow* feedback loop works. You may begin to notice symptoms of an out of reach goal, such

as procrastination, despondency and anxiety, or symptoms of a goal that is too easy, such as boredom, distraction or lack of motivation. You can use these feelings as a radar to help you navigate back to the positive feeling of flow using your 'just-right' goal setting strategy. Remember that at any time you can also choose to focus on skill development to bring an out of reach goal back within your reach.

***FLOW TIP #5: EXPLORE PLAYFULLY:*** Ask yourself: Am I exploring my piece or just playing through it?

Can I simplify this passage to get a feel for it? How about I improvise around this section to get a stronger sense of it? What novel things can I do to find out more about this challenge?

There are several main ways in which the brain strengthens its synaptic connections. These are repetition, novelty, emotional arousal and a careful focus of attention. Therefore, if you focus your attention on novel, expressive ways of practicing, you may be able to find more effective ways of overcoming the challenges you face and enhance your learning. To do this, replace the desire to want to master a piece by playing through it repetitively and instead you can go to a playful place to enjoy the learning process using exploratory flow questions. Ask yourself: *Am I exploring my piece or just playing through it?* As we say, musicians **play** music, so encourage yourself to have a playful attitude as you explore your music. One FMM student found, '...that was what was really unique about flow...to do the exploration meant it didn't have to be right and you could discover every possible thing and how it felt physically'.

To begin exploring it is recommended that you use your original KEY flow question (from Flow Tip #3) together with a 'just-right' goal and then apply the explorative flow questions one by one. Remember that your body is like a library that stores information by gathering it from the senses. It has the capacity to remember movements and sensations but it cannot learn how to play purely through analysis or thinking. Therefore, when you learn your music remember to focus on getting strong physical sensations by exploring the written rhythm, tempo, articulation, dynamics and even the notes themselves. Ask yourself: *Can I simplify this passage to get a feel for it?* Feel free to change anything that you know will help you to get more information about the music. Check your level of exploration by asking: *How about I improvise around this section to get a stronger sense of it?* As you do that, keep using your KEY flow question to maintain a comfortable connection with your instrument. Then ask yourself: *What novel things can I do to find out more about this challenge?* Try out a range of interesting ideas such as:

- Eliminate the extreme written dynamics and contrasts in articulation and play the passage or section slurred at a comfortable dynamic.
- Slow down and reduce the tempo dramatically to play as if in slow motion. As you do, focus on a comfortable body feeling, touch sensation and listening.



- Move notes up or down the octave to hear the pitches and feel the phrase shapes.
- Simplify a section by imagining it as a landscape. Smooth out the phrase shape by removing the less important notes to reveal the larger structure.
- Improvise around the music adding any notes you want and changing any elements you like to get a stronger sense of it.
- Eliminate anything that prevents a feeling of fluidity, such as rests and shorter notes and then focus on playing smoothly and maintaining the vibration of the sound.
- Play each phrase from memory in a range of different ways to discover how you like it best.

**FLOW TIP #6: DREAM UP IMAGINATIVE IDEAS:** Ask yourself: What is this music about? What does this music mean to me? Can I exaggerate the musical quality of these notes? Can I imagine a story or colours for this passage or piece? What is the character of this music? Can I use my imagination to enhance the sensation and expression of this music?

Recent discoveries in neuroscience have revealed that repeating your music in a mechanical way reduces optimal learning opportunities. To stimulate neuronal pathways and optimize your learning, it is recommended that you add expression and personal feeling to your practice repertoire. You can do this by stimulating your imagination using open flow questions designed to enhance characterization, personal expression and communication. Link up the imaginative questions with your Key flow question from *Flow* Tip #3 to retain a strong sensory connection. Add more variety to your practice and personalize your interpretation by asking yourself: **What is this music about?** and **What does this music mean to me?** Use imaginative ideas such as writing a feeling word above each phrase to describe the feeling of what you think it is about. Continue to develop the expression by asking: **Can I exaggerate the musical quality of these notes?** Remain confident in your own expressive feelings and practice conveying a range of emotions!

Create a story, poem or colours to go with the music by asking yourself: **Can I imagine a story or colours for this passage or piece?** Imagine all the expressive emotions in a story line or as different colours. Select different colours to reflect the emotion of each phrase and colour them onto a photocopied score for use in your practice. Ask yourself: **What is the character of this music?**

Imagine the passage you are practicing as if it belongs on an opera stage. Imagine a specific operatic character to represent the feeling you want and envisage this person performing on the stage. After you have imagined all the details of the characterization you want, play the passage through again and check your enjoyment levels.

To enhance the expressive communication even further ask: **Can I use my imagination to enhance the sensation and expression of this music?** You can learn your music thoroughly and deeply by vividly *imagining* playing it and focusing on the specific movement sequences you make, the

exact sounds you produce and the range of expressive feelings that go with them. ‘Imagery is an important mental skill for practicing discrete movements and visualizing desired outcomes’( Jackson et al., 1999, p. 106). It is recommended that you intersperse vivid imagining into your regular practice sessions and incorporate it when you are away from your instrument such as when travelling. It can be a very powerful tool for effecting positive change in your playing if done in short segments with an attitude of relaxed concentration. Make sure you are not imagining yourself as an external observer - your view should be as if you are actually playing. A FMM student explained the benefits of vivid imagining stating that, ‘imagining I can feel everything, then feeling...then listening. That helps me get into the zone.’

### Vivid imagining instructions

Identify a short phrase that you wish to focus on. Close your eyes, relax yourself and take three deep breaths. Imagine the music is right in front of you and you are about to play a phrase of it. Imagine that you start to play at a slow tempo, and then focus on the exact sensations and movements you make while hearing the sound you want on every note. Imagine the phrase again, and this time, add all the details of the dynamics and articulations exactly as you want them. Lastly, imagine the phrase a third time and exaggerate the expressive feeling and character to its maximum level. Relax for a few seconds before opening your eyes.

**FLOW TIP # 7: ENJOY YOURSELF:** Ask yourself: What could I do differently to enjoy myself more? Can I slow down to feel more and express more? How about I sing and gesture to enjoy more expressive feeling? How about I close my eyes, move my body and play sections from memory to enjoy the music more?

‘Enjoyment appears at the boundary between boredom and anxiety, when the challenges are just balanced with the person’s capacity to act’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 52).

Enjoying your practice is an important precursor to flow. If there is no enjoyment there can be no flow feelings, so, ask yourself regularly: **What can I do differently to enjoy myself more?** This way you will avoid the risk of being too perfectionistic which can self-sabotage your learning and your focus will be on enjoyment instead. You may notice external pressures that come from teachers, parents, peers and colleagues that can become ‘should do’s’, ‘must-do’s’ and ‘have-to’s’ that interfere with your capacity to have fun and engage with your music. To get back to a more positive perspective ask: **Can I slow down to feel more and express more?**

When musicians are enjoying their playing it feels like a deep type of active enjoyment where we feel engaged on many different levels. It is not like the pleasures of eating or relaxing on a sofa - it involves the *whole* self in active ways. To do this, focus on aspects that engage you on deep levels such as singing out loud, gesturing with your body to show the phrase shapes and bringing out the character of the music with personalized expression. Ask yourself: **How about I sing and gesture to enjoy more expressive feeling?**

Be on guard for common practicing mistakes such as the mechanical repetition of patterns and sections. If this is done with a focus purely on technique without attention to musical or expressive intention, then learning can be inhibited and enjoyment reduced. Remember that practicing with repetition does not necessarily mean that security and automaticity will occur. Instead, after a while the brain will switch off, and you will become bored and lose concentration. After this point very little learning can take place and in fact your playing may deteriorate as your concentration wanes. To prevent this from happening, add expression and musical intention to your physical actions. For example, add phrasing, dynamics and articulations to your scale practice so that you are always having fun and 'playing' music! You can also play from memory, by asking yourself: **How about I close my eyes, move my body and play sections from memory to enjoy the music more?**

It might seem like an impossible dream to be able to enjoy your practice all the time, however, students who have applied the *Flow* Music Method strategies have found their levels of enjoyment have lifted dramatically. For example, an FMM student reflected on her enjoyment levels while practicing remembering that she had enjoyed '*Everything!*'

As you apply the different Flow tips in the *Flow* Music Method you may have already noticed that the feelings of flow seem to come and go and cannot be made to happen by willpower alone. A FMM student became aware that, '*I found that I cannot force it*'. So, remember that flow feelings are subtle and whilst you can encourage them through exploration and imagination you cannot **make** them happen. Keep a flexible attitude, have fun with all the options and check your enjoyment levels to see what works best for you!

**FLOW TIP #8: FOCUS ON CONNECTION:** How about I explore the score to see how my part fits with others? How about I imagine the other parts I play with? How about I discover historical, analytical and structural aspects of my piece? How about I practice my communication skills?

'A violinist must be extremely aware of every movement of her fingers, as well as the sound entering her ears and of the total form of the piece she is playing, both analytically, note by note and holistically, in terms of its overall design'(Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p.64).

In your practice it is important to pay attention to the factors that will help you to connect with your music, your fellow musicians and your audience. To connect fully with the music,

musicians need to have a holistic knowledge of the score including its history, analysis and structure. It is recommended that you find ways to connect to your music by accessing information such as the historical details about the composer and why it was written as well as looking at any structural and theoretical elements. Check your connection with the music by asking: **How about I discover historical, analytical and structural aspects of my piece?**

You may notice that each piece of music has its own energy that you can connect to in terms of its storytelling. If you can lock into how the energy of the story ebbs and flows, then you can keep in mind the high and low energy points and musical climaxes. In this way you will know what to do with your own energy - where to hold the energy back and where to expend it. Remember that you can listen to recordings whilst following the score and also play along with recordings so that you can understand the energy of the music.

When you understand how your part interacts with other parts you will become more aware of where to gesture physically to other musicians. To discover more about the score, ask: **How about I explore the score to see how my part fits with others?** You may find appropriate times to signal to them such as starting and ending points or places where there are tempo changes in the music. To be confident in the sound of the whole score, ask yourself: **How about I imagine the other parts I play with?**

In order to build up the sense of connection with the audience be aware of how you are communicating your musical intention and consider the effect this will have on your audience. Ask yourself: **How about I practice my communication skills?** Practice your expressive gestures so that both the sound and the movement you make reflect the music you wish to portray. You can sing the music and gesture physically to portray the emotions you wish to portray. You can use video recording during your practice to check if you are communicating in the way you would like to. Imagine you are an actor on the stage and are portraying your character really strongly. Then see what effect that has on your playing and gestures and build this into your performance practice.

### ***FLOW* TIP #9: TAKE REGULAR BREAKS: Am I taking regular breaks to refresh myself?**

There are two main reasons that you might forget to take regular breaks when you practice. The first is if you become used to pushing through and trying hard so that a sustained effort feels normal or even desirable. The second is when you experience flow feelings in your practice and lose sense of time. In either situation it means you may be overriding optimal health levels for your body and mind. As the neuroscientist Altenmuller (2008) stated:

When playing a musical instrument, the central nervous system is mainly involved in processing a huge amount of incoming information from the ears and eyes, and from the sensory organs in muscles, tendons, joints and skin. The consolidation of the networks necessary for programming movement sequences occurs mainly in

the breaks after playing and during sleep. As a consequence, the more complex a task is, the shorter the practice time should be scheduled in one session and the longer the breaks should be planned. (p.343)

The body needs regular breaks to refresh and avoid over-use or injury and the mind needs a rest in order to maintain concentration. If you are feeling a bit low in energy or losing concentration give yourself a short break to drink and eat and move your body. If possible, leave your practice space and get some fresh air and a change of scene. If you have the time, go for a walk in nature to relax and reinvigorate yourself as that will provide a huge benefit to your practice. One FMM student noted the benefits of having breaks, reflecting that, 'If things were getting really hard [I would] just go and take a break, not pushing through it because I always do that pushing through and it doesn't always work out the way it should.'

People who experience being in the flow state report that it is an uplifting and energizing feeling. This is due to the feel-good hormones such as dopamine that are produced every time there is a sensation of reward coming from achieving your goals. When you are involved in the *Flow* feedback loop, the reward feeling has the effect of acting like a magnet that draws you in to the activity over and over again. Whilst in this state you will have lots of energy and won't necessarily feel the desire to rest or refresh yourself. In fact you may not even think about taking a break because you will be so positively absorbed in what you are doing. This means that you may accidentally keep playing longer than is good for your health and over-practice, so ask yourself: **Am I taking regular breaks to refresh myself?** Set an alarm every 40 minutes or so and have a break. Be careful to ensure that you take longer breaks when you are doing more extended practice and also avoid practicing more than 4 hours each day to prevent physical depletion and mental exhaustion. Altenmuller (2008) recommends that:

Generally, a practice session should be terminated when signs of fatigue appear. It is important to consider that over-practice (practice into bodily or mental fatigue) not only leads to no improvement, but to an active worsening of motor programs. This is due to a blurring of central nervous sensory-motor representations, when muscular fatigue appears. (p.343)

### ***FLOW* TIP #10: USE THE METRONOME, TUNER AND RECORDING FOR HEIGHTENED**

**AWARENESS:** Can I feel a strong beat inside myself? What physical sensations and sounds can I notice when I play in tune with the tuner? How can I become more aware of physical sensations, sound and expression when I record myself?

When using external supports such as the metronome, tuner and recording devices it is recommended that you avoid playing mechanically or losing your expressive approach. These supports can be used as flow focus points as long as you are able to keep a clear and interactive purpose that involves kinesthetic, sensory and expressive feedback.

**Using the metronome:** Let the mechanical metronome help you become a musical metronome.

When using the metronome you can focus on the motor actions that result from aiming for exact subdivisions. Choose a short passage or section to focus your attention on rather than a long section so that you can notice small details. Select a tempo that you feel is achievable and then set the metronome on a small subdivision within it so that you can be aware of the fine movements and adjustments you are making as you play. If you can match how the movements *feel* with the sound you make when you are *exactly* in time, your body should remember the sensations of movement and sound when the metronome is turned off.

It is recommended that you set the metronome to a small division of an achievable tempo. Then you can choose a short passage to play expressively while feeling the movements you make. You may notice how the sound and physical action go together and become one sensation. To strengthen the feeling, you can sing or conduct your music with the metronome going. If you play and then beat your foot strongly or walk with the metronome pulse you should feel the beat in your body. When you turn the metronome off keep beating or walking while playing expressively and maintaining the feeling of the beat inside you. You can also count out loud, clap the beat and sing or conduct to increase your feeling of the pulse. Once you can feel a constant internal beat then gradually reduce your external beating until you can play in time while still feeling the pulse *inside* your body. Check this by asking yourself: **Can I feel a strong beat inside myself?** Remember that you can subdivide the beat into smaller subdivisions by engaging your mind whilst your body retains the larger 'heart-beat' of the pulse. You can explore the subdivisions that the metronome provides to stimulate and develop this skill.

**Using the tuner:** Interact with the tuner to feel what you need to do with your body to play in tune.

You can use your ear as a guide to notice the subtle adjustments you can make for tuning. See if you can hear the difference in the sound while noticing the physical changes you are making to effect that change. Ask yourself: **What physical sensations and sounds can I notice when I play in tune with the tuner?**

It helps if you focus on the effects of your actions. Firstly, set the tuner so it sounds the note and then copy it so that your body learns to adjust quickly by listening. After that, you can use your sight to confirm if you are correct but it is recommended to use your ears *first!* You can also use the metronome sound as a foundation drone for practicing short phrases and check your pitch against the tuner note as you play along.

**Recording yourself:** Record yourself to enhance your awareness and musical communication

From a flow perspective recording yourself can help to develop a greater awareness of your playing due to the immediacy of the feedback. You can do this by asking: **How can I become more aware of physical sensations, sound and expression when I record myself?** It is recommended that you record *short* sections and set clear, 'just-right' goals so that you can check the results easily by listening back immediately. Use recording to check your progress regularly so that you can measure your improvement over time.

## *FLOW* FOR PRE-PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMANCE (Tips 11-12)

### ***FLOW* TIP #11: MAKE A CLEAR PRE-PERFORMANCE PLAN AND KEEP POSITIVE**

What do I need to do to create a clear, realistic plan? What flow tips can I use to maintain a strong feeling world? What rituals can I use to make sure I feel well prepared coming into the concert? Am I using positive thinking and meditation?

'Confidence can be difficult to attain or retain in the face of pressure, but the ability to do so can lift the experience to flow levels.' (Jackson et al., 1999, p. 59)

Before major performances you need to have confidence in what you will be able to do in performance. In order to increase your confidence it can be helpful to focus on a range of issues such as physical stamina and mental focus. It is recommended that you create a clear plan with realistic goals in the few weeks before the concert to keep you on task with your practice and performance goals. You can do this by asking yourself: **What do I need to do to create a clear, realistic plan?**

Remember that there is a difference between daily practicing and performance practice in terms of how you feel and what you do. Your goals for the performance itself are just as important as the process related goals you use in the lead-up to the performance. Keep both the practice goals and the performance goals clear in your mind by writing them down and keeping track of how you are going.

To help you prepare, your practice schedule should contain sessions at the same time of day as your actual performance so that your body clock can 'synch-in' in advance to the timing you will need. If possible organise practice performances, including a performance with an audience in the venue during the week beforehand. Get the conditions as close as possible to the event you are preparing for so that you can practice managing your energy levels and your flow skills under pressure.

In sport it has been found that 'When physical preparation is not at optimal levels, athletes are often less certain of what they will be able to do when performing. This uncertainty creates a lack of clarity in goals, which sometimes makes flow more difficult to achieve.'

(Jackson et al., 1999, p. 81) In music performance, there is not enough time to think of everything before you do it and your body needs to be able to play automatically by remembering the sensations of playing without the disturbance of intruding thoughts. There are a number of things you can do to enhance your physical preparation. This includes using flow strategies in your practice to build up an inner world of sensations so that automaticity is more likely during performances. Ask yourself: **What flow tips can I use to maintain a strong feeling world?** If you combine these with a clear practice plan, a healthy diet and suitable exercise you will be setting the scene for optimal physical preparation.

As your performance day grows nearer you may start to notice an increase in self-doubt and negativity. It is recommended that you boost your confidence and control your self-talk by saying '**STOP!**' when you notice a negative thought and then replacing it with a positive one. This way you will develop the habit of challenging your negative self-talk. To assist in this process, you can write down your negative thoughts each day and then find a positive thought to replace it with. Remember to create moments each day where you can simply relax your body and mind. You will find that even a couple of minutes of meditation will help to keep your mind calm and clear. Find a quiet spot and, when seated, check that your posture is upright and comfortable. You can begin by focusing on your breathing and being aware of the air coming in and out of your nose. As you breathe out, say to yourself 'Relax' and as you breathe in say: Energise! As you do this it helps if you slow down your breathing to encourage your mind to become calmer. If you find you are having difficulty concentrating, you can use a meditation recording that has instructions to follow, or one with sounds of nature to relax yourself. Remember that you can apply your meditation breathing at regular intervals during your practice to help keep you focused and in the moment. During this preparation phase remind yourself to use these ideas by regularly checking: **Am I using positive thinking and meditation?**

Make sure you plan some performance training in your plan so that you are playing regular run-throughs of your repertoire without stopping. This is where you can implement your performance goals and check your progress. You can use your performance training to identify the sections or skills that are progressing well and those that you wish to improve. Then you can mark out the specific sections for improvement and target them in short intensive practice sessions of between 10-12 minutes. In these sessions it is important to avoid trying to do too much as you might become stressed. Remember to apply your Key flow question and relevant flow tips to maintain a joyful and explorative attitude. To gain the most benefit from this type of practice, alternate the short targeted sessions with your regular practice and the performance practice run-throughs. Before and after each regular practice session and performance practice run-throughs, check your practice goals to see to check your progress. It is likely that you will need to adjust your goals from day to day and reset your plan to maintain an optimal preparation trajectory.



As the performance draws nearer you may feel an increase in tension, fear and excitement building up inside you. You can implement an exercise program and breathing meditation to keep your body at ease and help release stress. This will assist you to maintain optimal physical energy levels and encourage a calm mind for your performance. Simple exercises such as going for a walk or swimming are recommended as they involve your whole body and are a low risk for injury. Other activities such as yoga and tai chi can be very helpful if you already have skills in them or are involved in a structured, supervised program. When you are close up to the performance it is not recommended that you take up any new forms of vigorous exercise as it could potentially disturb your energy levels or cause injury.

The use of vivid imagining techniques can be very powerful in the pre-performance stage. Firstly, you can use your imagination to remember previous successful performances and recreate all the positive physical feelings and emotions. Secondly, you can let the music for your current performance run in your head remembering to make sure that the music is slow enough for you to be able to feel all the sensations and imagine all the sounds the way you want them. This can help to solidify your aims without tiring you physically. Thirdly, you can imagine yourself playing confidently in the performance venue and coping positively with every unforeseen eventuality. Remember that when you do this you can include all details such as your announcing and bowing.

In order to help maintain your sense of control and confidence, you can create personal positive phrases that suit what you need for the particular occasion. They can be used to raise or lower your energy, so if you create several different ones and apply them as required. For example, to energise yourself, you might say: I can do it! or to calm yourself down you could say: Relax - breathe - play. You can write suitable affirmations on your music to give you confidence when you need it. For example, you might have one that you use to motivate you during practice such as: I know what I need to do, one for pre-performance nerves such as: I feel calm and in control and another for performances such as: Let go and enjoy the music!

During the last few days leading up to the concert include rituals that you know work for you, such as eating certain foods or practicing at a certain time. This is a common mechanism musicians use to help them prepare. Ask yourself: **What rituals can I use to make sure I am well prepared coming into the concert?** You can create a clear schedule for yourself listing all the micro rituals you feel you need. For example, you can include all meal plans and the foods for your final meal or snack before the performance. Keep a record for each performance so that you can refer to it for future performance preparation. In your daily schedule, remember to leave time for unexpected issues that may arise particularly on the day of the concert itself.

When you arrive at the concert venue, ensure you find a comfortable personal space where distractions are minimized and you can prepare in peace. It is recommended that you take

your time to do your *Flow* warm-up using the sensory questions to become immersed in your playing and reduce worry. Make sure you remind yourself of the goals for your performance and what you want to achieve. Remember to stick to your personal plan, maintain the strategies that keep you confident and concentrate on those elements that you know help you to focus and have a positive experience.

***FLOW* TIP#12: BE COMFORTABLE, IMMERSE YOURSELF IN YOUR SENSES AND EXPRESS**

**YOURSELF DURING PERFORMANCES:** Is my body comfortable and breathing regulated? Are my surroundings organized and comfortable for me? Am I keeping my goals in my mind? Am I feeling every note in a comfortable way? Am I using my senses to connect with other musicians? What is the expressive feeling of this music?

It is reported that optimal experience can be disrupted by over-arousal and energy levels that are either too low or too high for the situation. The flow skills you have been using in your practicing and pre-performance planning will have helped you to learn to manage your energy levels and arousal state. This in turn can assist you to manage any pressure or stress that occurs during a performance.

There are also some simple things you can do to create a flow zone for yourself during the performance. For example, when you walk onto the stage be aware of your body and your breathing, check your energy levels and slow down your breathing while walking to keep yourself relaxed. Ask yourself: **Is my body comfortable and breathing regulated?**

Alternatively, you may need to energise yourself by applying your positive energizing affirmation if you are a weak or sleepy. To help with your focus, it is important to keep connected to your internal musical world and the musical and expressive goals for the performance. Try to avoid being too distracted by external things and keep your goals and chosen rituals foremost in your mind. Check this yourself by asking: **Am I keeping my goals in my mind?**

When you reach your performance position, check that you are maintaining a sense of fluidity in your body. Keep your focus on your slow, relaxed breathing so that tension does not build up through quick or tight breathing. Make sure that your immediate surroundings are organised in the best way possible for you to feel at ease and in control by asking: **Are my surroundings organized and comfortable for me?** Remember that sometimes things will happen that are outside of your control, so as the performance begins it can be helpful to maintain a flexible and responsive attitude so that you can respond quickly to any situation that arises.

During the performance you may lose concentration or experience distracting 'mind-chatter' or negative self-talk. If this happens, switch your focus to your body sensations and actions and apply a sensory flow question such as: **Am I feeling every note in a comfortable way?** When you

focus on the actions you make and the feeling of your body it will help bring you back into the moment. You will become more present and your analytical, judgmental thinking will decrease. Remember that it is helpful to keep your body moving harmoniously as you play to prevent tension from building up. If you begin to feel self-conscious or worried about your playing, activate your senses by looking around at the other players and listening to the sound they make while asking: **Am I using my senses to connect with other musicians?** If you are playing solo repertoire, focus on your expressive intentions and let the music wash over you as you play so that you can connect to it more deeply. When there are rests in the music it may help to use the opportunity to focus on slow breathing and relaxing your body. Activate your vivid imagining skills to anticipate the feeling and sound of the next phrase you are about to play. Maintain your focus on the expression by asking: **What is the expressive feeling of this music?**

In summary, it is important to maintain a positive, action-based focus during performance to keep your concentration and encourage flow feelings. As a FMM student reflected after performing, 'Flow helped me to focus on what I knew I could do well and to recover from mistakes. Instead of freaking out, to stay relaxed and focussed on what I could do.' Another FMM student felt that, '[during the performance] I was just really focussed on the music...I wasn't thinking of anything else.'

### *FLOW* TROUBLESHOOTING (Tips 13–14)

***FLOW* TROUBLESHOOTING TIP #13: CHECK YOUR GOALS :** Ask yourself: Is my plan clear? Have I chosen a small goal that I can achieve now (today)? What can I do now to increase my skills so that I can achieve my chosen goal?



Sometimes musicians set challenges for their practice that are too hard. It is easy to become accustomed to 'pushing through' and trying to achieve goals that are out of reach. We sometimes also practice without selecting any clear goals at all which can lead to confusion and a lack of motivation. In these moments we can lose our confidence and start to worry about failure, so ask yourself: **Is my plan clear?** If you feel you not fully engaged or not enjoying your practice, check your goal setting levels by asking yourself: **Have I chosen a small goal that I can achieve now?** Check to see if you need to increase your skills by asking: **What can I do now to increase my skills so that I can achieve my chosen goal?** This will help you to identify which direction you want to go in and give you a renewed sense of purpose.

***FLOW* TROUBLESHOOTING TIP #14: CHECK YOUR BODY FEELING AND MOOD:** Ask yourself: Am I getting bored or lethargic? Am I getting stressed or tense?



Musicians can lose interest during their practice for many different reasons. If you check your interest levels regularly you will notice if you are becoming bored, tired or stressed so ask yourself: Am I getting bored or lethargic? or Am I getting or stressed or tense? If you are having these negative feelings, have a break, stretch your body and refresh yourself before setting a new 'just-right' goal that excites you. It is crucial to check that you are not being too demanding so find something fun and interesting to energise and engage yourself! Each time you identify an enjoyable 'just right' goal to focus on, you will immediately feel more optimistic and your mood will become more positive. As well as finding a new goal, you can also focus on developing your skills by creating a fun exercise or exploring something you would like to improve. At any time, if you are getting exhausted from playing, stop straight away and do other inspiring activities such as listening to recordings. The main thing is to be aware that *you* have the power to make your experience more positive through monitoring your mood, noticing when it is less than optimal and improving your experience by making positive adjustments. In this way you can take control of your practice and create a positive and fun experience for yourself every day!

### SUMMARY

The *Flow* Music Method is designed to provide a broad range of strategies for musicians to employ in their practice and performance to promote positive and engaging experiences. Research has shown that it is possible for every musician to control the quality of their experience by paying attention to the exact balance between their own skills and the challenges they face. It seems that this is a fluid process requiring constant attention to the level of goal setting required for optimal learning for each individual. The *Flow* Music Method provides *Flow* tips based on the natural flow-encouraging characteristics of music set out as practical focus points for goal-setting. These are designed to be used in a flexible manner according to the needs of each musician.

It is important to remember when you are applying the *Flow* tips that it is impossible to *make* a flow experience occur. However, you always have the power to create the circumstances that set it up to happen. When you open yourself up to new experiences and make discoveries using the *Flow* Music Method, then it can be '*enlightening*' (FMM student) and produce profound positive effects. So, apply and adapt the *Flow* Music Method tips for yourself and take a leap of faith in your practice by experimenting and exploring your music with joy. Just go with the flow of music and enjoy your playing!

'By understanding and practicing Flow, the daily challenges facing professional musicians are positively focussed on sound production and ease of movement, leading to a sense of achievement and joy in performance, where one is communicating directly with the audience.' (Professional violinist, personal communication, 2014)

## *FLOW* PRACTICE and TROUBLESHOOTING TIPS

### *FLOW* TIP #1: CREATE AN OPTIMAL PRACTICE ENVIRONMENT

Ask yourself: Is my practice space comfortable and practical? Can I reduce distractions?

### *FLOW* TIP #2: GET COMFORTABLE BEFORE PLAYING

Ask yourself: Am I moving comfortably in a whole body way? Am I aware of my breathing? Do I feel relaxed in my practice space?

### *FLOW* TIP #3: SET CLEAR, ACHIEVABLE SUB-GOALS THAT ARE 'JUST-RIGHT'

Ask yourself: Have I set a 'just-right' goal? Am I having regular feelings of success?

### *FLOW* TIP #4: IMMERSE YOURSELF IN YOUR SENSES

TOUCH: Ask yourself: What can I feel as I play? Can I feel every movement I make? Can I feel every note?

EASE: Ask yourself: Is it a comfortable feeling? Do I feel relaxed? Does it feel easy?

SOUND: Ask yourself: Am I aware of the overtones and texture of my sound? Can I feel the vibrations of my sound? Am I enjoying my sound? Can I hear the expression in my sound?

### *FLOW* TIP #5: EXPLORE PLAYFULLY

Ask yourself: Am I exploring my piece or just playing through it? Can I simplify this passage to get a feel for it? How about I improvise around this section to get a stronger sense of it? What novel things can I do to find out more about this piece?

### *FLOW* TIP #6: DREAM UP IMAGINATIVE IDEAS

Ask yourself: What is this music about? What does this music mean to me? Can I exaggerate the musical quality of these notes? Can I imagine a story or colours for this passage or piece? What is the character of this music? Can I use my imagination to enhance the sensation and expression of this music?

### *FLOW* TIP #7: ENJOY YOURSELF

Ask yourself: What could I do differently to enjoy myself more? Can I slow down to feel more and express more? What if I sing and gesture to enjoy more expressive feeling? How about I close my eyes, move my body and play sections from memory to enjoy the music more?

***FLOW* TIP #8: FOCUS ON CONNECTION**

Ask yourself: How about I explore the score to see how my part fits with others? Can I imagine the other parts I play with? How about I discover historical, analytical and structural aspects of my piece? How about I practice my communication skills?

***FLOW* TIP #9: TAKE REGULAR BREAKS**

Ask yourself: Am I taking regular breaks to refresh myself?

***FLOW* TIP #10: USE THE METRONOME, TUNER AND RECORDING FOR HEIGHTENED AWARENESS**

Ask yourself: Can I feel a strong beat inside myself? What physical sensations and sounds can I notice when I play in tune with the tuner? How can I become more aware of physical sensations, sound and expression when I record myself?

***FLOW* TIP #11: MAKE A CLEAR PRE-PERFORMANCE PLAN**

Ask yourself: What do I need to do to create a clear, realistic plan? What flow tips can I use to maintain a strong feeling world? What rituals can I use to make sure I feel well prepared coming into the concert? Am I using positive thinking and meditation?

***FLOW* TIP#12: BE COMFORTABLE, IMMERSE YOURSELF IN YOUR SENSES AND EXPRESS YOURSELF DURING PERFORMANCES**

Ask yourself: Is my body comfortable and breathing regulated? Are my surroundings organized and comfortable for me? Am I keeping my goals in my mind? Am I feeling every note in a comfortable way? Am I using my senses to connect with other musicians? What is the expressive feeling of this music?

***FLOW* TROUBLESHOOTING TIP #13: CHECK YOUR GOALS**

Ask yourself: Is my plan clear? Have I chosen a small goal that I can achieve now (today)? What can I do now to increase my skills so that I can achieve my chosen goal?

***FLOW* TROUBLESHOOTING TIP #14: CHECK YOUR BODY FEELING AND MOOD**

Ask yourself: Am I getting bored or lethargic? Am I getting stressed or tense?

***GOLDEN FLOW RULE***

*To play with flow, set yourself 'just-right' goals that focus on the sensory, expressive, explorative and enjoyable world of music!*

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