

15. PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HARMONY: A FOUNDATION FOR A SUCCESSFUL INSTRUMENTAL CAREER

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Abstract: *From an outside perspective, an instrumentalist presents a polished, complex, and fulfilled image, perhaps even an inspiring one. However, a closer look reveals that a performer's life must adhere to certain principles without which the public outcome will fall short of expectations. An instrumentalist requires both mental and physical strength. Their work is fundamentally motoric, making daily attention to physical care indispensable, including rest, nutrition, and exercise. Additionally, to fully leverage professional opportunities, instrumentalists must cultivate healthy and effective social and professional relationships, underscoring the importance of social intelligence. Thus, in achieving the ultimate outcome, physical and mental harmony come together successfully.*

Key words: *instrumentalist, harmony, physical, mental, performance, relationships, social intelligence*

1. Introduction

Art, whether auditory, visual, choreographic, or dramatic, is an indispensable factor in fostering a healthy, balanced society with promising prospects. The artist, therefore, whose contribution is sometimes perceived as lacking pragmatism, brings color, elegance, and well-being to society in the most concrete sense. From an external perspective, an instrumentalist offers a pleasant, complex, and fulfilled image, one that may even inspire fulfillment in others. Most of us have likely attended a live concert, observing the performers closely, admiring their movements, virtuosity, and artistry, all while appreciating them through the lens of a spectator, whether informed or otherwise.

However, how often do we reflect on what lies "behind the curtain" – in the practice rooms or the homes of these people who, day by day, refine their instrumental technique to continually improve? A closer examination reveals that the life of a performer necessitates adherence to specific principles, without which public results will never meet expectations. An instrumental performer requires both mental and physical strength. Their work is fundamentally motoric, making daily attention to bodily care through rest, nutrition, and exercise a non-negotiable necessity.

Additionally, to maximize their opportunities, an instrumentalist must cultivate healthy and effective interpersonal relationships, pointing to the importance of social intelligence. Ultimately, their output harmoniously integrates physical and mental equilibrium. A dedicated instrumentalist must commit to their craft to achieve the best possible results in alignment with their potential. This commitment entails a profound acceptance of their professional trajectory, encompassing the necessary steps and actions required along the way. They must understand, embrace, and diligently fulfill their responsibilities, regularly engaging in self-evaluation.

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2. Discussions

A professional practicing instrumentalist – and I am referring primarily to classical music performers – must study at least 6 hours every day. However, this amount of time is insufficient for a performer who participates in international competitions, with the optimal amount in this case being 8-9 hours. Simple practice yields remarkable results, even when the instrumentalist is merely playing without focusing on challenging passages or problematic techniques. As long as the basic interpretative technique is correctly mastered from the very beginning, its application will undoubtedly yield results, directly proportional to the time spent with the instrument, and the moment of appearing on stage will be of quality.

Furthermore, as in any other professional field, focusing attention on the task at hand is essential. In this regard, the professor and theorist Gerald Klickstein states in his guide: "Discipline mental habits in practice will lay the groundwork for you to direct your thoughts under pressure. In contrast, if you routinely let your attention drift as you practice, then it's questionable whether your mind will be steady when your stress level climbs."⁶⁸ Starting from this observation, I find it appropriate to transpose the principle from the instrumentalist to the instrumental ensemble as follows: considering that the ensemble is made up of individualities, the quality of the sound result is, logically, directly dependent on the quality of each instrument's output.

Consequently, in an orchestra, the incorrect interpretation of the score by some instrumentalists will not be covered by others who perform the score correctly but, on the contrary, will reduce the overall sound quality of the orchestra. Returning to the initial idea, correct instrumental technique, practiced for a sufficient number of hours, guarantees favorable results. Why? Because through repeated action, certain synapses are formed, and due to neuroplasticity, the brain adapts the entire system involved in musical activity so that automatisms are formed, which are essential.

Neuroplasticity makes learning possible, starting from the earliest ages and continuing into adulthood, transforming the brain's abilities in relation to professional demands. "The brain continuously reorganizes itself, and nerve cells are capable of forming new connections and redirecting their activity. (...) Until recently, it was believed that the brain could create new circuits only while still in the process of development, meaning during childhood, but it has been observed that the adult brain also possesses plasticity and can reconnect to adapt to environmental changes."⁶⁹

To prepare at optimal potential, achieve the best possible results, and ensure the sustainability of artistic development, an instrumentalist must maintain appropriate behavior regarding nutrition, rest, and exercise. A good balance among these brings the instrumentalist as close as possible to the desired level of performance. Why is nutrition so important? Because energy consumption is

⁶⁸ Gerald Klickstein, *The musician's way: a guide to practice, performance, and wellness*, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 23

⁶⁹ Alexis Willett, Jennifer Barnett, *De cât de mult creier avem cu adevărat nevoie? Metoda infailibilă ca să-ți folosești 100 % inteligența*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2017, p. 163-164: „The brain is constantly reorganizing itself, and nerve cells are able to form new connections and reorient their activity. (...) Until recently, it was believed that the brain could create new circuits only while it was still developing, that is, in childhood, but recently it has been observed that the adult brain also has plasticity and can reconnect to adapt to changes in the environment”.

significant during study hours, and poor nutrition will lead to insufficient resources for concentration and limb strength. I say "limbs" and not "hands" because, although interpretation mostly involves the use of the hands, there are instruments where the lower limbs also make a substantial contribution, such as percussion, piano, and organ.

Among professional instrumentalists, attention to proper nutrition is often inadequate, as its importance is not fully recognized. However, this can only be a mistake, as it leads to decreased performance and a departure from high aspirations. To address this shortcoming, an early pedagogical shift is necessary, requiring the instrument teacher to adopt a holistic approach to the teaching process, including a solid focus on improving the student's physical resources. This principle applies generally to anyone seeking optimal physical fitness and, in particular, to an instrumentalist aiming to achieve ambitious goals. Nutrition should be varied and rich in nutrients from all categories. Physicians throughout history, who have explored the potential of the human body, have confirmed its ability to regenerate through simple, intuitive behaviors such as regular and balanced meals.

Complementing the previously discussed aspect, I bring attention to the second crucial element of behavior underlying optimal development: rest, which is vital in the activity of a professional performer. A body that has had sufficient sleep and adequate rest is prepared to handle the physical effort required by instrument practice, in contrast to a body that is inadequately rested, having lacked the time to regenerate and replenish energy. Moreover, when the body is not in good condition, both intellectual and psychological aspects suffer as well. Let us imagine the level of concentration during a moment of fatigue: naturally, it cannot be at its optimal level, and this is how a negligent attitude toward one's body leads to reduced performance.

Although it is an intuitive truth, scientists emphasize it because it is easily overlooked. The American psychologist Daniel Goleman explains this phenomenon in specialized terms as follows: "Chronic overwork can affect the hippocampus, which plays a crucial role in learning: it is here that short-term memories, such as what we have just heard or read, are stored before being transformed into long-term memories for later recall. (...) If we experience constant stress in our lives, this flood of cortisol disconnects existing neural networks, and we may experience memory loss."⁷⁰

The third aspect I bring into discussion as a factor for improving interpretative performance is sports. It is generally accepted that organized physical activity offers various benefits. Instrumental performance most often involves a fixed body position maintained for extended periods, and as we might anticipate, this leads to specific muscle contractures as well as spinal or other joint pain. Under these conditions, practicing sports is not merely a mental relaxation activity but also a way to give the body the opportunity to remain vigorous.

⁷⁰ Daniel Goleman, *Creierul și inteligența emoțională. Noi perspective*, Second Edition, Curtea Veche Publishing House, Bucharest, 2018, p. 67: „Chronic overexertion can damage the hippocampus, which plays a crucial role in learning: this is where short-term memories, such as what we just heard or read, are transformed into long-term memories for us to recall later. (...) If we have constant stress in our lives, this flood of cortisol disconnects existing neural networks and we can have memory loss”.

3. Results

Among the most beneficial sports in this regard are swimming and ballet, as they engage multiple muscle groups and promote flexibility, though other sports also bring significant benefits. Engaging in physical activity daily or at least 3-5 times a week ensures, in addition to improving physical appearance, muscle toning, which reduces the negative impact of prolonged study positions. Additionally, stretching exercises help alleviate muscle pain, relax, and increase body flexibility. A performer must be aware of these aspects and incorporate them into a preventative approach to their physical well-being.

Professional performance on a musical instrument requires, in addition to the actual study, a serious concern for physical well-being. Complex research and specialized studies have been written in this field, and our challenge is to first accept and then apply this holistic approach. None of the factors mentioned will yield the desired results in the absence of the others. A thorough study of the instrument, combined with balanced nutrition, quality rest, and frequent physical activity, will undoubtedly bring outstanding results and sustainability.

In contrast, balanced nutrition will not provide the necessary optimal resources in the absence of rest and physical activity. Just as physical activity and rest are not sufficient when practiced separately. Of course, in our culture, viewing all of these as a cohesive package is still a challenge, given that for decades these fields have been studied individually, and interdisciplinarity is a near-new concept. However, a shift in perspective is welcome and even necessary for a society that seeks to be progressive and modern, as well as for an educational system that aims for practical outcomes.

As I have outlined a few lines regarding physical harmony, the next step is to shift our attention toward mental well-being. This is dependent on the right balance between harmony with oneself, balanced self-esteem, and healthy relationships within the circles one practices. Canadian doctor Gabor Maté concluded that "the potential to be whole, to be healthy, resides in all of us, just as the potential for illness and lack of harmony does. Illness is a lack of harmony. More precisely, it is an expression of an internal lack of harmony."⁷¹

Harmony with oneself is beneficial to every human being, and to an artist, being the missionary of beauty, even more so! A musician who is at peace with themselves has the availability and tranquility to fulfill their task with serenity, doing everything with a sense of responsibility and finding professional fulfillment in what they do. In another context, as mentioned earlier, social intelligence is a *sine qua non* factor in interpersonal relationships, so an artist will achieve results and have an enhanced positive impact on society to the extent that they maintain good relationships. "Human beings are not designed to be solitary, and as a result, they have developed biologically and ideologically a series of mechanisms for connection, which go very deep in building relationships."⁷²

⁷¹ Gabor Maté, *Când corpul spune Nu. Costul stresului ascuns*, Curtea Veche Publishing House, Bucharest, 2021, p. 302: „the potential to be whole, to be healthy resides within all of us, as does the potential for disease and disharmony. Disease is disharmony. More precisely, it is an expression of an internal disharmony”.

⁷² Ligia Fărcășel, *Ipostaze ale interpretării muzicii non-academice ca factor de coeziune socială*, in *Geniu, talent, creativitate, Volumul I. Lucrările Conferinței Științifice Internaționale. Ediția a-XIII-a*, Romanian Academy, Iași Branch, 2022, p. 91-92: „Human beings are not designed to be solitary and, consequently, have developed at a biological and ideational level a series of connection mechanisms, which go very deeply into building relationships”.

Moreover, an element that tips the balance in a positive direction in this regard is the work conducted in a friendly environment, where responsibility and goodwill are universally accepted values that encourage trust. In such a context, study and performance can be set as an individual priority and, consequently, an institutional one. In this regard, American musician Barry Green observes the importance of a good relationship between members of the musical ensemble: "Times have changed in the past twenty years, and there is now much wider agreement that an atmosphere of threats and doubt. Many contemporary conductors have found their ways of encouraging that sense of trust in the players under their baton."⁷³

4. Conclusions

What conclusions can we draw? A musician who aims for certain objectives must ensure that they are doing productive work. However, this productivity comes through the correlation of several factors, which we frame within the concept of harmony – both physical and psychological. Therefore, if we have sometimes imagined that the musical results we admire on stage are solely the result of intense practice, it is appropriate to reconsider this aspect from the perspective of the whole set of concerns. The higher a musician aims for in performance, the more serious their concerns must be in the area of physical and psychological well-being, alongside their actual professional development. It is also necessary to renew our mindset and view things from a multidisciplinary perspective, for, in the end, society is a whole made up of multiple components.

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⁷³ Barry Green, W. Timothy Gallwey, *The Inner Game of Music. The classic guide to reaching a new level of musical performance*, Pan Books Publishing House, 2015, p. 214