

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: FLOW

The element of flow is critical and yet seems rarely articulated in the normal development and practice of music. Flow is particularly important in music which incorporates improvisation or that calls on long-term memory. So what is flow?

Flow is a dynamic state of hyperawareness which is in touch with the progress of actions, emotions and energies during every moment, and is able to coordinate and control them without impeding them.

“Going with the flow” ultimately means operating creatively and harmoniously in the present moment. Problems such as asynchronization within an ensemble, memory blocks, performance anxiety and contrived improvisation are indicators that the flow is impeded! Fear is one of flow’s biggest enemies, as it distracts you from the moment by impressing the importance of the past or future.

I have attempted here to articulate ways I think flow can be improved:

- **Put group above self.** Your focus should not be self-centred, but rather aware of the other people in the group, and of the overall group sound.
- **Flow is more important than speed.** The technical demands of speed require flow, but speed is not as important as flow itself. Though you must practice technical facility, you must also practice flow. Try practicing it in contexts where you must aim for and achieve predetermined structural/rhythmic destinations in a relaxed and free manner. Try also practicing it in contexts where you can be free-flowing without specific goals apart from the flow itself. (Here, you must suspend judgment on how you sound.) If the freedom is not there, slow down and consider other points made here.
- **Consider your posture.** Stand sure-footed. Like flow itself, posture should not be rigid, but should be an elastic, organic stance. Neck, shoulder and mouth tensions typically indicate “trying” too much, which is an unconnected, self-centred action.

- **Visualize good flow without your instrument.** Maintain that positive feeling when you pick up your instrument. If the feeling disappears, put down the instrument, return to this positive “space” and try again. When visualizing, you can move your limbs freely like a child might if she/he were trying to play your instrument - without technical facility but with innocent freedom. Do not be concerned with the outcome (i.e. how you sound) but rather just enjoy the process.
- **Move your focus.** While maintaining a group-centred awareness, gently self-refer to monitor yourself and practice getting back into the flow when you sense it is lost. This should be done while the rest of the music flows along - you should not need to cease the music to get back “on board”.
- **Record yourself.** Use recordings and video to relive the feeling of the flow and recognize how it sounds when it is broken.
- **Get back to nature.** Take time out to experience flow in the natural order.
- **Quieten the mind.** A busy mind will never maintain the flow. Practice sitting still and meditating. The more familiar you are with stillness of self, the easier it will be to access this “space” when playing music.
- **See the masters.** Respected creative artists - particularly ones that improvise or spontaneously create in public - are all masters of flow.
- **Exercise.** A fit body knows how to flow. Physical fitness boosts confidence and self-esteem - good traits to attain. I recommend swimming, yoga, dancing and martial arts. All sports are good stress-reliefs.
- **Breathe.** Be aware of how you are breathing. A short or shallow breath is at odds with flow. Good breathing habits are assisted by regular exercise, and are symbolic of the circular, dynamic and uninterrupted nature of flow.