



Inspiring Musical Performance

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At age twelve, I dreamed of becoming a classical guitarist. I was inspired by hearing the great Spanish classical guitarist, Andres Segovia. After ordering music I had heard on a Segovia recording, I couldn't wait until the mailman delivered the music, so I could create the sounds myself. I loved to practice and I practiced constantly! I loved music passionately, I loved playing the guitar, and I was going to make a career as a classical guitarist. I played a full concert by age fourteen--as Segovia had--but by age twenty-three, I couldn't play anymore. In a period of eleven years, I had gone from inspiration to depression.

When I was twelve, no matter what else was going on in my life, I had my music. Music was central to my joy. Music sustained me and gave meaning to my life. Because of this, it was going to fail me. Instead of being the icing on the cake, it became the cake.

Nothing can sustain our happiness if we aren't loving to ourselves. I once asked a pianist to choose between two wishes. Either she could be the greatest pianist who ever lived or she could be in a state of constant, divine joy. She chose being the greatest pianist. I believe she thought that being the greatest recognized pianist in the world would guarantee her constant joy. This just isn't so. The only way to be happy constantly is to love ourselves.

I was a perfectionist on the guitar. If I didn't play perfectly, I got horribly angry at myself. At times, I kicked the stand across the room and screamed at myself. I could not spend a lifetime demanding perfection from myself without losing my inspiration and energy. When something inspires you, your life energy rises. Life has a grand meaning. If you sacrifice yourself in any way for what you love, then your life energy drops. Over time, it will drop to the point that you resist practicing, and then what you once loved ceases to inspire you.

What is inspired musical performance? What is inspired musical practice? They are acts that bring great joy to your heart without sacrificing your body or yourself. Is it hard work to play inspired day after day? It is at first. However, it is infinitely harder work to play day after day only because it is what you have done most of your life.

I taught a workshop at a conservatory for students between the ages of fourteen and twenty-four. I asked them why they played their instruments or sang. There was dead silence. I cajoled them, and they eventually gave answers like, "I've done it all of my life, I want to make a living at it." Not one student said, "I love music. It makes me happy. It makes me cry. It gives meaning to my life. I can't live without it. It opens my heart." How sad; to be as good as they were they all had to have played for these reasons originally.

They had made the ends more important than the means. *Making beautiful music from your heart and spirit* is inspired performance. *Avoiding mistakes* is making music from the ego, and this is playing with fear. Playing for

the beauty of the music and not hurting yourself is staying with the means. Playing to avoid errors and with doubts about a successful career is playing fearfully for the ends. Making a living in music is an act of faith, not a matter of luck. Steps toward success as a musician are necessary: auditions, degrees, recordings, giving concerts, etc. But if musicians believe that there is not enough work, no matter how good they are, then they are defeating themselves as they practice. I believe a music career is guaranteed if you expect success enough to override the doubts. How can you practice daily with true inspiration, without expecting to succeed in music?

If you can play for the joy of it and have your performing become effortless, expressive, and inspired without sacrificing yourself, then you are playing truly from your heart. How do you do this? 1) Reduce the work in your body to a minimum with balanced posture and high dynamic energy. 2) Learn to troubleshoot on your instrument. If you can't play something with facility and you are physically "normal," then you need to do something differently. 3) Breathe. When you hold your breath, you are locking up your body. If you sing or play a wind instrument, learn support without rigidity. 4) Trust yourself to play accurately and with inspiration without constantly judging your playing. 5) Always perform as a gift to yourself and others. A performance cannot be inspired unless you get out of your own way and play fearlessly, whether accidentally or by choice. I prefer choice. It is possible to play with inspiration on call if the elements of balanced posture, troubleshooting, playing as a gift, not holding your breath, trusting yourself and your body are all integrated into your playing.

I became an Alexander Technique teacher because of my experience as a guitar student at the Royal College of Music in London. I developed severe carpal tunnel syndrome practicing six or seven hours a day. I went to an Alexander Technique teacher and found out very quickly how I was sacrificing my body to do what I loved. I would hunker down and go for the perfect performance. I learned from the Alexander Technique teacher that if I spent at least part of my practicing taking care of myself, which meant not making the music more important than I was, I stopped injuring myself, and my playing automatically became better. This was the dawning of my awareness that almost all of us sacrifice ourselves for what we want to do and love to do. An athlete will ruin his knees to win a race. A dancer will ruin her knees to dance. A musician will sacrifice his neck, his arms, his hands, and his voice to create the great performance. Almost everyone who does a physical activity at a high standard expects to be injured at some point and usually is. We get what we expect! There is a self-fulfilling assumption that injury is the price we pay for excellence and long hours of work.

Musicians usually do not know that they have been sacrificing their bodies for years before the incapacitating injury hits. They ignore and may even be totally unconscious of the aches and pains accumulating in their bodies, because of their determination to play well. Imagine what it would be like not to sacrifice yourself for what you love. Imagine always practicing with kindness and self-awareness, releasing tension as you play. Like the person sitting in the front row at a concert, you would hear the music in comfort. In addition, you would have the great joy of creating the music without paying a price. You would have your music and make it kindly, too. Show yourself love by practicing with kindness. Recognize what is not working, make changes that work, and each day you will run with joy to practice.

The following five sections discuss posture (Alexander Technique), trusting yourself, troubleshooting, breathing, and playing as a gift. Using the concepts and tools presented in this article will enable you to play with facility and inspiration consistently, rather than hoping the gods will visit you every once in a while.

Posture

Playing an instrument or singing with facility calls for the whole body to be balanced. I went to an Alexander

Technique teacher for carpal tunnel syndrome, and what I very quickly learned about the pain in my left wrist was that my whole body contributed to the problem. I couldn't just fix my left hand and wrist if I did not bring my body into balance.

This is where traditional instrumental technique and Alexander Technique differ. Both vocal and instrumental technique usually address only the obvious parts of the body necessary to get the job done. Pianists are usually taught only about hands and arms, which is also the case with most non-wind instruments. Wind instrumentalists are taught about the hands, arms, mouth, and breath support. Vocalists learn about the head, throat, and breath support. The rest of the musician's body is usually left to fend for itself. However, it is the rest of the body that *supports* the arms, the torso, and the head.

My Alexander Technique teacher showed me that I curled over the guitar as I played. I learned that my curved torso gave no support to my shoulders. If my shoulders had no support, then my arms had no support. If my arms had no support, then my hands and wrists had no support. If my hands and wrists had no support, then there was no way I could consistently play well. When you are not supported posturally you cannot play well, and you try harder and harder. When you try harder and harder, the tension level goes up dramatically in your body. When the tension level goes up dramatically in your body, you reduce the space between your joints. When you reduce the space between your joints, you create carpal tunnel syndrome. When you create carpal tunnel syndrome, you hurt. When you hurt, your playing feels wrong, and you begin to lose your love for your instrument. When you lose your love for your instrument, your beloved occupation becomes a chore.

What is the posture necessary for pain-free performing? When standing, let all the bones of the body balance on top of each other. Let your skeleton support your musculature. When you expect your musculature to support your skeleton, you lock your body into positions that counter any sense of lightness and flow in the body. Allow your knees and ankles to be unlocked. Unlock your thighs when you are standing, and your knees will be easy without bending. Allow your shoulders to float on your ribcage and move on the breath. Let your inhale fill the whole torso. When the whole torso is in flow it acts as a giant lung, giving a sense of lightness to your body. Allow your head to balance on top of your spine. You *never* need to lock your neck to perform, even if you are performing a difficult or loud passage. Let your spine lengthen and gather on the breath- lengthening on the exhalation and gathering slightly on the inhalation.

Bring the instrument to you rather than taking your head down to the instrument. Let your arms flow to the instrument without clutching the instrument. Hear the music without crunching down. Let your body be balanced without pushing the sound to the listeners. Leaning forward will really stress your neck and back. Be the performer/listener at ease, enveloped in the power of the performance.

When performing while you are sitting, allow your sit bones to be a second set of feet for your torso. The pelvis supports the spine, the spine supports the ribcage, and the ribcage supports the shoulder girdle. When you sense this, your arms and head have a body under them. Many musicians exist as a head, a pair of hands, a throat, and diaphragm without any awareness of the beautifully designed scaffolding supporting the upper body.

A performer with high dynamic energy in her body creates a powerful, intense, and fully engaged performance. When she is performing, she is actually taller than she normally is. For this lengthening spine to occur, the excitement, the fear, and the passion of playing need to be embodied as expansion rather than hunkering down. You can be afraid and choose to embody fearlessness and joy in performance if you know how to create a balanced, opened, dynamic body. When you embody fearlessness, you do not reinforce fear - you allow your fear

to convert into excitement.

Fear can only be sustained for a long period by doing two things that feed on each other: 1) Having frightening thoughts that evoke the emotions of fear in your body. These are thoughts like, “I’m going to forget the music. I am going to miss the notes. The audience is going to hate me if I mess up.” 2) Keeping your thoughts in a continuous loop: You tense to suppress your panic; you hunker down; you minimize your breathing; you either make your movements too broad or too compact with tension; you hurt. This continuous loop of fear/tension/pain can become so intolerable that you put a lid on all feelings, which is depression. It is a specialized depression used to suppress the panic of performance. The performer can look sad or appear to be high energy when this is happening. But this “high energy” is nervous, hyperactive energy, which is depression disguised.

I went through this kind of depression before performances. These panic attacks hit me regularly a week before concerts. At some point, I decided there had to be a better way, and I decided to feel the panic rather than suppress it. Whenever I felt my panic welling up, I would stop what I was doing, sit quietly, and let the panic run rampant through me. It was almost intolerable at first, but the panic always spiked and then rapidly dropped off. It did not kill me! I did this all the way up to the performance, even allowing the panic attack right before playing. For the first time I was not exhausted from holding my fear in check before I played. I played beautifully.

Alexander Technique is one of the tools in my box that allow me to give and to teach inspired, unstressed performance. There are basic Alexander principles of good posture and good use to be applied in any activity, from running to sitting to dancing to singing to playing an instrument. In addition, I believe in tailoring the application of the Alexander Technique principles to the specific needs of each musician and each instrument.

The performer wants relief from pain and struggle as quickly as possible, so I have the client play the instrument or sing during the majority of early lessons. I start with the general and move to the specific quickly. We address posture, fingering, or vocal production problems in the first lessons, while always reminding the client that he is more important than the music. I teach musicians not to do repeatedly what doesn’t work. I do not believe you can “get it right,” if you are sacrificing yourself. Something is missing in any performance if the player is not being kind to himself in his thoughts and to his body.

The most important thing I learned in my Alexander Technique training is not to sacrifice myself as I teach someone how to stop hurting. We are always teaching the world who we are twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Let it be gentleness and kindness for yourself as well as others. This is true love.

Trusting Your Body

“The precision in hitting the right keys is strictly proportional to your stage of release. Translate as release, your complete unconcern about what the hands are going to do - let them go with unshaken assurance as they are realizing your ideation. Do not guide them even mentally.” (Bonpensiere, p. 42-43.)

This opening paragraph is from the book *New Pathways to Piano Technique* by Luigi Bonpensiere. In a nutshell, Bonpensiere teaches us how to perform effortlessly an activity that requires exceptional precision. Bonpensiere says that if the visualization of the execution of a piano piece is perfectly clear in your thoughts, then the actual execution of the music will be as precise as the ideation (visualization), if you have faith in

yourself.

What does it mean to have faith in yourself? It means that as you leap across the cello string, or up and down your voice, you know you will not miss, cannot miss. When I first read the opening sentences of this section from the Bonpensiere book, I knew I had found the Holy Grail of effortless performing. This is what prodigies do, even if they do not know it. I used to repeat a difficult passage or note leap on the guitar over and over, hoping that if I could hit the right notes enough times, somehow I could always count on myself to do so in performance. I also believed that if I played a note wrong, it was programmed into my nervous system. I had to repeat the passage over and over without error, if I was going to be able to count on myself in a performance. It never happened. I was unable to repeat the passage perfectly every time at tempo. My whole premise was based on wishful thinking: if I could practice perfectly, then I would be guaranteed a perfect performance. What I was doing was not working, but I kept doing it because it was supposed to work.

I began to apply the Bonpensiere principle of accuracy to left hand leaps across the guitar neck. A note is sustained on the guitar as long as the left hand holds it down, so the moment you change position, there is a break in the sound. To achieve legato, I had to move reflexively to the next note, if I didn't want to use a glissando. It had to feel as if my hand was in one position and then instantly teleported to the next position, if I didn't want to guide my arm. The only way to play big positional shifts consistently and reflexively is with trust. I did it, and it worked! For the first time in my playing, I was leaping around the neck of the guitar and hitting the mark effortlessly and fearlessly.

Then doubt entered. I started missing, and I didn't know what I was doing wrong. I kept trying repeatedly to reclaim what I had found and kept failing. Then I remembered the opening statement of this section, "The precision in hitting the right keys is strictly proportional to your stage of release." I withdrew all effort to get it right, and instantly I was hitting the mark without struggle.

I began applying this to every note in my playing, and it was incredible. It worked! It never failed me. Whenever I began missing, I stopped playing and returned to trusting my hands. It was a great feeling to know I had no choice. What I mean by "no choice" is that if I was going to hit the mark effortlessly, I had to trust myself. I had no other options unless I wanted to return to playing constantly afraid of making the same mistakes over and over.

I did not stop making mistakes, but I stopped making the same mistakes, and I knew my faith would negate my concern about these errors. Not being concerned was the only way for me to hit the mark without struggle. The moment I returned to distrust, I became fearful and missed. As long as I trusted my hands, I felt this remarkable relief, knowing I did not have to be hard on myself.

I came to view this trust as accessing my inner computer. Then I read *Zen in the Art of Archery* by Eugen Herrigel, and found a spiritual framework for what I was doing. Herrigel lived in Japan and studied Zen Archery for many years. He was taught to hit the bull's-eye by letting his true self (spirit) release the bowstring. If he was in spirit and the spirit released the bowstring, then hitting the mark or not hitting the mark was of no concern. So, I came to view my playing with trust as *playing from my spirit*.

How does trusting yourself to perform accurately affect warming up? Your warm-up should be gentle and conscious. It is incredible how ritualistic and unconscious many musicians' warm-ups are. They plow through scales and arpeggios for a half-hour and hope that this warm-up ritual will bestow the gift of good practice on

them. You get out of bed to practice, your body feels very uncoordinated, and you hope your warm-up will help you get the bear, rather than the bear getting you. If the bear gets you as many times as you get the bear, then it may be time for something different.

My solution is to follow warm-up steps that are kind and that for me usually guarantee good practice. Start by lying down on the floor. Do a total body inventory. Notice where there is tension and release it. Notice if there is a difference between the left side of your body and the right side. If there is, sense which side feels more balanced, and invite the other side to unlock and come into sync. Let your shoulder blades, where so many of us usually hold tension, totally release to the floor. Let your whole body sink into the floor, really getting a sense of the floor supporting you.

Gently get up off the floor and sit on the edge of a padded chair that allows your knees to be slightly below your hip joints. Rest your arms and hands, palms up, on your legs and close your eyes. Register all of the tension in your body and release it. Release in the Alexander Technique sense allows your body to lengthen, to broaden, to deepen, to flow, and to lighten. You flow upwards, becoming longer in your torso, and your knees release away from your hips, opening your hip joints.

Next, take your instrument or sing a scale at the speed and volume that does not stress you. This means playing at a tempo where accuracy comes easily. As you continue to warm up on scales and arpeggios, begin to play with greater and greater abandon. Slowly pick up the tempo and let the volume rise. Let go of any trying and doubting, and you can have a great time practicing. If it begins to fall apart, slow down and let go of “trying to get it right.” Keep rediscovering how easy your instrument can be.

“My instrument is hard.” This may be the main conscious and unconscious belief that limits a musician’s ability to play with trust. I have never met a musician who said that his or her instrument was not hard to play. This goes back to being a beginner on the instrument. Many musicians do not have fond memories of learning to play their instruments. They wanted to get past being a beginner so quickly that they made this time difficult. They were hard on themselves, because they did not know where the notes were on the instrument. This is when they “decided” their instruments were hard to play.

Imagine always seeing your instrument as easy. You can let go of the physical habits and beliefs that make you afraid of your instrument. You can play as if it has always been a friend.

Troubleshooting

Troubleshooting is identifying what is not working and then letting it go. Assuming that you have no physical limitations to prevent your playing a passage and that the passage in question is actually playable on your instrument, if it isn’t working then you are interfering with your ability to play.

The first step is to release tension. If a singer cannot sing a particular passage and she has good technique that usually works, what should she do? I start by asking her to release her knees and ankles and then sing on the release. I ask her to allow her knees and ankles to remain released as she unlocks her lower back and buttocks and then sing on the release. I ask her to continue to do all of the above as she releases her neck and sings with a free neck. I am changing her physical habits at a level that is profound to the performer internally but may not be visible to most people watching her.

I know that what I am showing her is necessary for her to be able to perform the passage, even if it does not immediately solve the problem. I want to make her aware that taking care of herself is primary to singing. This realization enables her to begin a cumulative set of physical changes that all together will make the passage singable and effortless and will allow her to sing consistently without fear. Performing effortlessly with a high dynamic (intensity) is a continuum. A piece can always be performed with less and less effort and more and more freedom.

I next ask her to allow the movement of her shoulders and arms, sing on this movement, and let her shoulders remain free as she sings. Let her shoulders float on her ribcage and not lock them. Locking the shoulders gives a singer the illusion of support. Then, I ask her to: Feel the rise and fall of her chest as she sings. Feel her abdomen move forward on the inhalation and sing on the exhalation. Feel her sides expand out on the inhalation and sing. Feel the upper and mid-back expand backwards on the inhalation and sing. Feel her lower back move backwards on the inhalation and sing. This process of awareness and singing on the release is eliminating habits that reinforce fear. Think about it- it is pretty darn hard to be afraid of making mistakes if you are focusing on changing or modifying the singing habits of a lifetime!

What if none of this has worked, and she still cannot sing the passage with ease? The second step is for her to have confidence in her memory, her body, and her ability. I ask her if she knows where she is going, what the notes are. Many times, I get a “yes,” then a “no,” then a “yes.” This means the performer realizes she knows where she is going, but because of her fear, has lost confidence in her memory and ability. I ask her to sing again with the realization that she knows the music and the passage sounds good. Then I ask her to see in her mind the ultimate performance of the passage and sing, and it is even better. Finally, I ask her to see the ultimate performance as easy, to get out of the way of her body, and this can be gorgeous.

The third step is not to label pieces as hard. When we label pieces as hard, we get what we expect. When you start to play a piece that you label as hard, what are you saying to yourself? You may be telling yourself that you do not have what it takes to play the piece. If you have done this with a lot of pieces, then you may be feeling very limited on your instrument. This is a very painful feeling, and probably you have suppressed it. You do not believe you are good enough to play a difficult piece well. You play slowly enough to play it well. You pick up the tempo, and it falls apart. You slow down again and take another run at it, and eventually you can get it at tempo, but it feels strained at tempo and your playing is inconsistent. At this point, many players unconsciously label themselves as “not good enough to get it.” Is this true? Usually it is not.

Fourth, when you are in the process of trying to solve a performance problem, start first by playing slowly. During this process, identify every single place in a piece, whether it is between two notes or chords or a whole passage, that makes you doubt your ability to play beautifully. Next, take apart every single difficult place and figure out what you are doing to make it difficult. Here is an example of organ pedal playing to demonstrate a technique that is not working.

An organist showed me a passage on the organ pedals she could not play well consistently. She had to alternate between heel and toe as she played a scale passage on the pedals. It worked fine played slowly, but at tempo, it fell apart. I asked her to play the passage again slowly, so I could watch her foot. I realized it was not clear to her what was going on in her lower leg, and that she was not clear about her lower leg’s relationship to the upper leg. Every time she moved from heel to toe to heel to toe, she raised her heel, which raised her upper leg. Her knee was going up and down a lot, comparatively speaking, every time she shifted. This certainly did not work at a fast tempo and she could not play the passage with ease.

I asked her to observe how the lower leg rotates under the upper leg when the knee is bent. At the organ, to alternate heel toe across the pedals, the heel and toe of the foot are constantly changing their relationship to the knee as the lower leg rotates. I asked her to play and sense this rotation of the lower leg across the pedals without lifting the leg. I asked her to shuffle across the pedals by letting the heel and toe brush the pedals as she played. This was a brand new feeling to her, and at tempo, it worked. She noticed that the knee no longer went up and down, and her hip felt much freer. Playing this way also eliminated the excess work of her calves, because she was pushing her heel off the pedal as she played the note.

The four steps in troubleshooting are: 1) Releasing tension; 2) Having confidence in your memory, body and ability; 3) Not labeling pieces as hard; and 4) Identifying the problem sections of a piece in order to solve the technical misconceptions.

Reducing movement and tension by realizing exactly what the body does in a performance can be very subtle, but also earthshakingly profound. Suddenly, the unplayable is playable. What felt hard becomes easy. What was supposed to be hard for the rest of your life is not. You now can do what the gifted player does. How will you deal with the fact that you may be gifted? Finding out you can now play what seemed impossible is very personal and emotional. It doesn't matter whether you ever demonstrate to others that you can play the seemingly impossible. What matters is that you have demonstrated to yourself that you can play the seemingly impossible and do it beautifully.

Breathing

I want to look at breathing on the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual levels. Physically, when we inhale fearlessly, the whole torso, which starts at the sit bones and ends at the shoulder line, expands in all directions like a balloon being blown up. But unlike a balloon, there is more movement in the front and sides of the body, than in the back, bottom (pelvic floor) and shoulder line. These areas have less movement for structural reasons. Our ribcage is able to move up and out on the contraction of the diaphragm (inhale), because there is not a powerful, weight-bearing skeletal structure in the front of the body as there is on the back vertebral spine.

Since the back does not expand as much as the front in breathing, if we create tension in our backs, this tension will block the movement of the back and restrict the breathing. Musicians know that a small change in technique can create a major change in playing, so releasing in the back and sides, shoulders and pelvic floor, can create a huge change. Every time we release holding in our bodies, we feel lighter. We feel less constricted in our bodies, because muscles unlock, expand and allow joints to open up. Tension and its resulting tightness pull the body downward physically, and we feel much heavier.

On the inhalation, as the diaphragm contracts and lowers, the ribs open outward, and the whole torso expands. Exhalation is a release, a letting go of the air brought into the body. Ideally, exhalation is not controlled during the playing of a keyboard or string instrument. Neither is inhalation, if you let your body breathe when it is ready.

A pianist is playing a difficult piece. What happens to his breathing? He probably holds his breath constantly, especially during the hardest passages, and then sucks in air before he passes out. This constant holding and gasping for air many times gets confused with "feeling the music." When we tie excessive physical tension to musical expressiveness, we usually have a big surprise waiting for us when we record ourselves. Our playing is

typically not as expressive and flowing as we thought!

I ask the pianist to observe his breathing as he plays, to choose consciously not to stop his breathing or control the inhalation. I tell him simply to let his body inhale and exhale when it is ready. Then I ask him to begin playing scales and keep his awareness totally on his breathing, again only as an observer.

Imagine making breathing part of a non-wind instrument's technique. Imagine never holding or controlling your breath as you play. Make a fearless breathing pattern part of your playing. If your breathing does not back up your fears, then you have created new habits that are loving to yourself. Good technique is an act of self-love.

We hold our breath in any situation that frightens us. To avoid feeling fear in performance, we hold the breath to suppress those feelings. Holding the breath creates more tension in the body, more tension affects our playing, we become even more afraid, and hold the breath even more. The only way out is *not to control the breathing*. After a period of time, observing the breath moves into its own fearless breathing pattern. If we learn to breathe through difficult passages, then we will not make them more difficult.

When we play without holding the breath, there is a major impact on the shoulder girdle (shoulder blades and collarbone). The shoulder girdle then moves constantly on the breath no matter how demanding the passage is. The shoulders rise, fall, and are never still. Does this detract from accuracy? No. Accuracy is a function of faith, not of immobilizing the body. The gentle rise and fall of the shoulder girdle flows into the arms and hands, and the joints are easy all the way into the fingers. The arms and shoulders feel light and supported away from the torso without excessive work. This lightness creates a sense of wellbeing, and it is here that passionate expression is realized.

Conscious technique is what we do consistently that allows for ease in performing. Technique is usually thought of in physical terms: we place our hands thus and so. But mind and spirit are also part of technique. My definition of technique is that it is a collection of habits, mental and physical, consciously and unconsciously chosen, to make playing as effortless as possible.

If a pianist sits curled over when he plays, is this part of his technique? If a violinist is so tense her neck will not stop hurting, is this tension part of her technique? If a cellist holds his breath during his playing, is this part of his technique? I believe that all of these unconscious, unaddressed habits are part of a musician's technique. I once saw a very famous guitarist make all kinds of facial expressions during the performance. This was part of *his* technique. Everything we do in our bodies during a performance affects our sound and interpretation, so all of our habits are part of our technique. Many unconscious technical "choices" make performing more difficult and need to be released.

When the music is intense, your breathing pattern will change. Allow it to reflect the mood of the music. It can be sad breathing or happy breathing or fearful breathing. If the mood of the piece is fearful, your breathing reflects the mood, not a fear of the piece itself. You are not in danger. Fearless breathing (see previous paragraphs) allows you to express your feeling without holding your breath.

What do you do when your breathing reflects that you do not want to play the piece? We sometimes play when we do not want to - for the teacher's approval, a grade, or for our own good. We play for an orchestra job or other performance obligation, so we can keep the job. Therefore, it becomes a choice. If you take responsibility for the fact that every piece you play is your choice, this gives you back control of your body and your life. If

you hate playing a piece, should you make yourself suffer? This is like the child who, in a tantrum, holds his breath and screams, "I'll hurt myself because you won't let me do what I want to do." Do not hurt yourself physically and emotionally because you do not want to play this music right now. Play with kindness, because you have chosen to play this piece for your greater good.

When your breathing pattern is fearless and you keep releasing the tension from your body, playing can become a spiritual experience. As you gently observe and let go of all of the effects of fear on your body, you may find your spirit playing the instrument. It feels as if the instrument is playing itself. Playing an instrument or singing becomes a meditation, a connection to God, to your spirit, to love, to all others. Then you play being who you really are. And making music is then an act of love.

As a Gift

Why do you make music? Is it because you love it? Is it just a living, a job? Is there a way for you to have almost every moment of practicing and performing be a joy? Could you handle this? When music is given as a gift, it fulfills its purpose, its only purpose.

Over the last hundred years, with the advent of recording, classical music has become an ever-increasing exercise in playing to be perfect. The pressure for note-perfect performances has grown so powerful that many musicians, who do not want to buy into this, may feel as if something is wrong with them. They may feel as if they are lacking something, because they do not feel they can win against this pressure for perfection. Is there a way to play with beauty and ease without pushing yourself?

There are three books published by psychiatrist Dr. John Diamond called *The Life Energy in Music, Volumes I, II and III*. After I read these books, I combined what they were saying with the Bonpensiere book on faith in performance. I began playing with love and faith. Diamond's three books talk of making music as a gift to yourself, to the audience, to someone you love, and to God. He says that if we want our playing always to be high energy, then we should always play giving the music as a gift.

When I went to an Alexander Technique teacher to stop the pain in my wrist, I learned to problem-solve on the guitar and to speak to myself in kind ways that eased and transformed the poor posture and tension in my body into ease and balance. When I read the Bonpensiere book, I learned to play with faith in my hands. When I read the Diamond books, I began making music as a gift. After I went through the Alexander Technique training, I learned to stop sacrificing myself physically. My evolution has been one of integrating the physical and mental aspects of playing and eventually adding in the ultimate emotional feeling - love. All of this became part of my playing.

Many times in our culture, we confuse understanding for feeling, for experience. However, the feeling is what gives meaning to whatever you are doing. It does not matter whether you are writing an article, making music, or running around a track; what gives the activities meaning is how you feel about them, not your competence.

Music given as a gift is a reaching out with love to yourself or someone else. This offering of love gives true meaning to the music. If you play a piece that is about sadness, then you are offering sadness as a gift. It is not about making the listener sad; it is about transmuting the listener's own unresolved sadness into love. We do not play to make ourselves sad, afraid depressed, or angry; we play to heal our unresolved fear. We usually do not realize this, and therefore, many performances, literally, do not lift the spirits of the audience.

When a practice session or a performance is given as a gift, it is *cantillatory*. Dr. Diamond describes as cantillatory a performance or a work of art that raises our life energy. When a listener connects to the performer who is giving her playing as a gift, then the listener's life energy rises.

When you practice, what are you saying to yourself? Are you criticizing yourself for what is not working? Many of us learned that the best way to improve our playing is with criticism, that the way to do our best is to attack ourselves for what we play wrong. Our life energy, our well-being, our capacity to feel love diminishes when we criticize ourselves. Perfectionists criticize themselves, and probably most classical musicians are perfectionists or suppressed perfectionists. The more a person ties his self-worth to his ability to play well, the greater his resistance to practicing and performing. If you withdraw your love of yourself when you play badly, then you are bullying yourself to play. However, if your main reason for making music is as a gift, then your self-worth will not depend on how well you play.

Playing as a gift is its own reward. How could you refuse a gift of love? If your three-year-old child gave you a gift, would you tell her it isn't good enough? If you accept the gift given with love by your child, then you, at least for the moment, are two consciously connected spirits. When you play for a beloved or an audience or God as a gift, you connect with love to the listeners; you all feel this love.

A gift given and received surrounds you with love and a feeling of wellbeing, but what effect does it have on your playing? I remember playing a concert and beginning not to play well. I kept trying harder and harder to feel good about how I was playing, and then I realized how desperately I wanted the audience to admire my playing. At that moment, I had two choices. I could keep pushing and trying to entertain the audience, or I could realize that the only real reason I wanted to be there was to honor the listeners with a gift. I chose the gift. What happened was beautiful. I instantly felt the tension level drop in my body. I stopped trying to drive the strings through the guitar. My sound became fuller and warmer. My tempo slowed, and I stopped missing notes. Even more profound was that I stopped wanting the piece to be over. I began enjoying the sounds, the beauty of the music, the audience and I did not want it to end.

If a musician always judges his playing, at what point does he get to enjoy his playing, reaping the rewards of all his work? If you are never pleased with how well you play, then at ninety years old, you will still be telling yourself, "It will be good enough tomorrow." When will you get to hear what you are doing? How can you truly hear the music if there is a constant critical voice going on inside? Turn this voice off for a moment and listen to the beauty of your instrument, the notes, the melody, and let this beauty be enough. When was the last time you played a piece for the sheer beauty of it? When was the last time you played and a voice inside did not say this could be better or that could be better? Imagine always returning to give the music as a gift, after you are through troubleshooting and deciding on interpretation. J.S. Bach said that his music was always a gift to God; that is why his music is so cantillatory.

Classical music has complexity and depth rare in other forms of music. To convey this depth and beauty, many players sacrifice themselves physically and emotionally for the performance, playing less and less for themselves and others. By limiting our options for playing, we have burned out. This does not have to be. There is not a no-win situation if you want to make music. Practicing with excellence can actually raise your energy level, so that by the end of a practice session or performance, you have even more energy.

If one-by-one you remove the obstacles to an inspired performance, at some point all that is left is ease, joy, love,

and passion. Then if you let your playing be a gift to yourself and to everyone else, when you play, you are only offering love to all the listeners.

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