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Finding focus : using external focus of attention for practicing and performing music

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PART I: MAKING MUSIC

Making music is a sensorimotor activity: the result of a combination of motor skills (involving complex movements of the body) and sensory skills (involving the collection of aural/listening, visual and tactile experiences). Learning to make music requires hours and years of practice involving the repetition of highly complex movements until they can be reproduced reliably (Altenmüller, 2012). Experts in music pedagogy advise that effective practice needs to include developing focussed attention, using goal setting, self-regulation, self-reflection, and the ability to form good strategies (Chaffin & Lemieux, 2004; Ericsson, 2002; Araújo, 2016; Zimmerman, 1998; McPherson & McCormick, 2006; Bonneville-Roussy & Bouffard, 2015).

Although many pedagogues and trainers stress the need for developing attention, focus and working with goals, there is often little advice on what to focus or concentrate on. Musicians are usually advised to repeat something until it is automatic and to notice if something is right or wrong – i.e. to evaluate their playing or compare what they are doing with what they want to achieve. What often occurs is that the musician goes into a process of trying to understand intellectually not only what and why something is or is not optimal, but also how to control the process consciously. Recent theories on motor learning suggest that understanding and controlling complex movements consciously impairs optimal learning and performance. Implicit (unconscious) motor learning and external focus of attention (focussing on the intended effect of one's movements) will be presented in this chapter as an alternative to conscious control and understanding.

In the first chapter the current mainstream views and theories of motor control and performance are outlined, and the role of attentional focus is discussed. The second chapter argues why using external focus could be the most effective and efficient way to learn and perform music. In Chapter 3, ways of focussing “externally” for musicians will be proposed, forming a basis of the design of the empirical projects in this study.