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

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PART II: FOCUSSING ON MUSICAL INTENTION

Three Empirical Projects

Playing accurately and with confidence is the goal of all performing musicians – including natural trumpet players. As the natural trumpet (see Fig. 0.1) has no mechanisms, the movements required to play it can't be seen and easily monitored. Mastering natural trumpet playing requires that the player has a precise control of the form and speed of the airstream. A slight deviation results in a 'cracked' note or even a different note than the intended one, and even experienced players are prone to making audible mistakes in performance. The fine motoric skills that are required are too complex to control and steer consciously, making natural trumpet playing a good example of an activity that can suffer when the player uses internal focus. Factors that can affect the result include skill level, difficulty of the music, and the level of arousal (nervousness) of the player. As discussed in the previous chapter, the crucial question for the player is, therefore, "on what should my attention be focussed in order to achieve the optimal and reliable result?" What the player focuses on directly before and during playing could either help or hinder the desired outcome. This applies to both the learning process (practicing) as well as during performance.

In the previous chapters, literature was discussed that led to the conclusion that using an external focus of attention (focussing on the intended effect of one's movements) is more beneficial than either focussing on directing the movements themselves or being occupied in analysis or judgement during playing. Studies in sports and movement sciences showed positive results for movement effectiveness[23] (including accuracy), efficiency[24], movement form[25], and automaticity[26] (Wulf, 2013).

Self-efficacy can also be positively affected by external focus (Pascua, Wulf & Lewthwaite, 2015). Benefits have been found to affect both beginners and more experienced people, and in early as well as later stages of learning. The great majority of studies have been in the field of sports. A study by Guss-West and Wulf (2016) about ballet dancers argued that although external focus was preferable to internal focus for enhancing movement effectiveness and efficiency in dancers, only 27% of the 53 international professional ballet dancers surveyed reported using external focus instructions in their coaching.

Apart from the studies made by Duke et al. (2011), Atkins & Duke (2013), Atkins (2017) and Mornell & Wulf & (2019) (see Chapter 2), no significant studies have been made investigating the possible benefits of external focus for musicians' learning and performance.

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[23] Movement effectiveness refers to how accurate and consistent the outcome of the movement is.
[24] Efficiency refers to the amount of physical and mental effort and energy expended.
[25] Movement form refers to the way a movement is performed.
[26] Automaticity refers to the stage where a movement requires little conscious thinking.

As already mentioned, Duke's study (2011) involved testing a simple finger movement and not complex music-making; Atkins & Duke (2013) and Atkins (2017) also tested using a short fragment of a few notes. Mornell & Wulfs' study compared internal and external foci for music performance involving participants each playing a complex piece of music. The current research was motivated by the desire to introduce explicit external focus methods to naturalistic music-making contexts. The three studies presented in the following chapters were designed to see how external focus affected musicians in three increasingly complex field environments that also involved learning.