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

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An Overview of the Projects

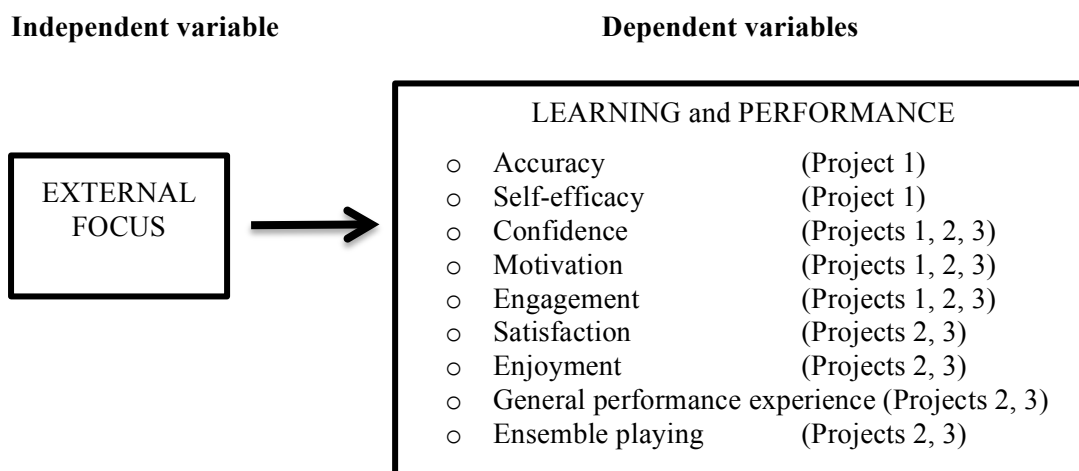
Introduction

The effects of external focus on musicians' learning and performance were explored in three consecutive empirical projects involving conservatoire students. The three projects took place between March 2015 and April 2016. In the first two projects the subjects were natural trumpet players ($n=7$) and the same people participated in both projects. Using natural trumpeters as test subjects was not only practical (the researcher is a natural trumpet player and teacher), but also expedient because measuring accuracy in natural trumpet playing is relatively straightforward. Even slight inaccuracies in motor control can be heard as clearly audible mistakes. Inaccuracies during playing can simply be counted. The third project involved a chamber music ensemble with mixed instrumentalists (natural trumpeters, string players and keyboard players).

The projects were designed in such a way that each consecutive project represented a more complex context: Project One tested a series of practice sessions where external focus was compared to the participants' "usual" ways of practicing, and Project Two explored the effects of external focus in the preparation of a trumpet consort performance. Project Three was the preparation of a concert involving not only trumpeters, but also string players and keyboard players in order to ascertain whether external focus could benefit musicians in general and not only trumpeters.

Each project was designed to investigate the effects of specific independent variables, and the design varied for each project. The projects looked at the effects of external focus on aspects of learning and performance experience of the participants and specifically involved looking at the effects on accuracy, self-efficacy, confidence, motivation, engagement, satisfaction, and enjoyment, as well as general performance experience. A mixed methods design was used in each project to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. The variables of all three projects are illustrated in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1 Variables for the Three Empirical Projects



Measuring **accuracy** gives a clear indication of whether a skill has improved.²⁷ Improved **self-efficacy**, **confidence** and **motivation** are indicators that the subject's ability to learn has been positively influenced (Bandura, 1997; Dweck, 2000; 2008; Wulf & Lewthwaite, 2016). **Engagement**, **satisfaction** and **enjoyment** levels are indicators of whether the learning or performing experience was a positive one for the participant. According to studies on anticipatory auditory imagery, **ensemble playing** can also be expected to be positively affected (Keller, 2012).

All three projects involved the players practicing and/or rehearsing using external focus. The context and design of each project differed and each project investigated specific independent variables. The assumption was that external focus would positively affect both skill acquisition (learning) and the performance experience of the participants.

The overall hypothesis was that using external focus would be beneficial to musicians' learning and performance experience.

APT: Designing an Audiation Practice Tool

Over the course of the three projects the participants were subjected to different forms of external focus (explained in more detail in the following section). The use of the Audiation Practice Tool (described below), however, featured in all three. Verbal-based instructions were avoided as much as was possible.

²⁷ Using external focus to focus on musical results rather than focussing on technical results (e.g. accuracy) does not mean that accuracy is not important in music-making. Accuracy is an indication of the level of motor control achieved. The hypothesis of the research described in this study implies that accuracy is achieved by not focussing directly on accuracy, but is rather a side effect of "musical" focus.

A practice tool was designed to test and explore external focus in all three empirical projects. The APT (Audiation Practice Tool) is based on Edwin Gordon's definition of audiation (see Chapter 3) and illustrated below in the way it was presented to the subjects.

APT: Audiation Practice Tool

Instructions:

Imagine the phrase you are about to play with as much nuance as you can evoke (e.g. pitch, tone quality, volume, articulation, transition from one note to another...)

Sing and gesture the phrase dramatically

Play the phrase

Play **another version(s)** of the phrase

The uses of clear and vivid musical imagery, singing, gesturing and playing variations were described in detail in Chapter 3. Alternate fingerings or changes in tonality – as suggested by Gordon (2001) – is not possible on a natural trumpet as it is restricted to the harmonic series of a specific key.

How External Focus was used in the Projects

The use of external focus was integrated in each project, sometimes in an overt way and sometimes covertly as well. In the intervention phase of Project One the participants were asked to practice using APT. The participants in Project Two were asked to prepare their repertoire using APT, and rehearsals were conducted with the intention of avoiding technical (declarative) language. The project and concert itself focussed on showing the role of the trumpet in baroque Europe rather than the (more usual) focus of showcasing the music. The performance incorporated narrative (by an actor/narrator) and audience interaction, and resulted in less focus on perfect playing than usual for a chamber music concert. Project Three was designed so that the participants were busy with the idea of communicating emotion and affect during performance (again, rather than concentrating on technical perfection). The idea for the concert preparation was to create a learning environment that encouraged exploration – through improvisation and the use of APT. As in Project Two, the use of declarative instruction was avoided.