

“Musician’s Tools” for the Workplace

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Much has been written lately concerning research proving the wide-ranging benefits of childhood training in music and the other arts. These children grow up and enter the workforce with personal dispositions and habits of mind that make them valuable assets in any organization. With that in mind, what about adults who never received arts training? Is there a way to take some of the aspects of music and music-making, and use it to enhance workplace performance in adults with varying arts education backgrounds?

Indeed, there is! Music provides a highly effective multi-dimensional framework for teaching a number of business skills. In this article, we are going to briefly touch on three ways of using music to enhance workplace performance: the first two use music itself in the form of specific listening experiences; the third involves taking a look at the structure and nature of both music and music-making, for clues to peak performance.

Entraining to Music

Of all the art forms, music can be considered the most pure because it bypasses the intellect and affects us on the cellular level. Our bodies literally transmit sound vibration, and are profoundly and subtly affected by the music we hear, as well as other sounds in our environment. Because music is “structured sound,” when we are fully *entrained* (vibrationally in sync) with music, it can have the effect of helping us focus our energy to the tasks at hand. This is why, when you feel energized but scattered, or not energized enough to get work done, a good dose of high-energy music carries you into your tasks, and you get the job done effortlessly! “Entrainment” is the key. When you are *not* entrained to music, you find it very annoying. When that happens, particularly, if you need to be in an environment with music that you dislike, all you need to do is move to the beat! Moving some part of your body, if only tapping a finger, is enough to entrain you to the music and annoying music instantly becomes OK or even enjoyable! Similarly, when you are using music to enhance your energy level (speed up or slow down), moving your body to the music will increase its effect. In addition to enhancing your physical energy level, music entrainment can be used

to change your *state of mind*, enhancing creativity, as well as general performance.

Tuning the Ear

Music entrainment is the first and most commonly experienced “musician’s tool” for enhancing workplace performance. The second is more in the realm of a “trained musician” skill. We have all heard the adage, “Excellence is in the details.” Classical musicians spend years learning to both hear and execute subtleties, details that contribute to an overall sound or style; therefore, specific classical music listening experiences can be a highly effective way to train yourself to perceive subtleties more acutely. *Hearing* details translates to *seeing* details; in fact, *all* the senses become more acute, or sensitized, when the ear is trained to be more sensitive. Consider the importance of keen discernment and attention to detail in the following areas, to name but a few:

- Composing and typing letters, articles, reports, marketing copy
- Graphic design/layout
- Meeting and event planning
- Strategic planning
- Software design
- Trouble-shooting/problem-solving
- Listening and communication
- Innovation

One detail to listen for in classical music is what musicians call “shaping,” the subtle change in “dynamics” or volume level within a phrase of music. When you sing, you probably let your voice get louder and softer as the melody rises and falls, or your voice trails off at the end of the phrase before taking a breath. That is shaping. Trained singers pay particular attention to where they need to “push” the sound and where they need to back off, to “shape a phrase” beautifully. Pianists are constantly concerned with imitating the vocal effects of shaping, which is not easy, since the piano’s sound is produced by hammers striking strings! To practice hearing this detail listen to piano music by Chopin, or chamber music (duos, trios, quartets) by any composer from the Romantic period (for example, Brahms, Mendelssohn, Schubert, or Schumann).

Another detail to focus on can be found easily in pieces from the Classical period, such as Mozart, Haydn, and especially Beethoven. Listen to the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and you will hear after the familiar "da-da-da-dum" (played twice), a very tension-filled point of *silence*! Beethoven used points of silence for various effects—tension, resolution, anticipation, repose, and so forth. Listening to those silences and hearing the subtle changes in effect is a great way to tune your ear. My favorite demonstration piece for this is the opening to Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto; in the first 45 seconds of the piece, there are about fifteen silences and each one sounds different!

Besides making the listening experience richer, this kind of focus has another benefit in addition to sensitization to detail and nuance, a benefit that is even more profound. When you listen with such close attention, you become *fully present*. Being present is the key to being a good listener and to doing any job well. Yet, how many of us "practice" this skill? Using the kind of focus that allows for perception of classical music's nuances plants the seed of presence in your dealings with others—co-workers, clients, friends and family—and in your approach to both your work and your personal life.

Rhythm and Flow

Listening with focused attention and consciously entraining to music's energy stimulate an awareness that leads us to our third "musician's tool"—rhythm and flow. When I lived in South Carolina, I used to go with friends on wonderful, long hikes in the Blue Ridge Mountains, and on one such occasion I felt particularly fatigued. Not wanting to ask the group to stop for me, I thought of my high school marching band days, and how invigorating it often was to march in a parade. So, as I walked alongside my energetic friends, I began to put that well-remembered rhythmic drum cadence to my steps, and, to my amazement, it worked! The feeling of fatigue completely vanished! Probably the single most critical factor in the art of making music, "rhythm and flow" is an invaluable tool for peak performance in any area.

As a piano teacher and performer, I observe on a daily basis the fascinating phenomenon of how putting one's attention on the steady rhythmic pulse of the music seems to line up all the mental processes needed to execute the piece fluently. At a certain stage of learning a piece of music, there comes a point where *just* trying to get the notes right will not

do it. All the myriad mental processes going on to make fingers and arms and eyes and heart all work in concert are magically synthesized *only* through a conscious focus on the beat! In other words, when focus on the accuracy of the notes becomes secondary to the flow, or movement of the music, accuracy improves!

In addition to the measured intervals of the beat, there is another aspect to the concept of *movement*. Another level, the "harmonic movement," is created by an interplay of tension and resolution, which creates an overarching flow to a piece of music. Musicians call this *overall movement* the "long line." In music, dissonant chords produce feelings of tension, while consonant, pleasant-sounding chords serve to resolve the tension. From the composer's vantage point, this "tension-resolution" aspect is the same as the writer's "conflict-resolution" dynamic that is integral to a good story. This dynamic gives the story "movement" and interest. From the performer's viewpoint all "levels" of rhythmic movement, from the beat to the long line, must be *consciously* focused upon in order to perform well and in order to give the audience a compelling musical experience.

So what does all this have to do with workplace performance? What lessons can we glean from the musician's focus on rhythm and flow that will improve our performance as knowledge workers? First of all, *everything* has rhythm. Rhythm is not just an element of music and dance; the rhythm of your day can be just as palpable as the beat of your favorite song. The trick is to learn how to recognize the subtleties of your inner physical and mental rhythmic structure, and work *with* it to entrain to the rhythm of your job, your co-workers, your environment.

Just as music and story telling have cycles of tension and resolution, scientists have found that most of our bodies' physical and mental systems go through many cycles of activity and rest every day. These "ultradian" rhythms allow the many physical and mental systems to rejuvenate for short periods for peak efficiency during times of activity. The rhythmic cycle is approximately 90 to 120 minutes of activity, followed by 15 to 20 minutes of rest. Although not every system runs on the same "clock," there is a close correlation. When we learn to tailor our activities to fit our bodies' natural rhythms or manipulate our bodies' rhythms to fit the required job (e.g. take a rest break prior to an important meeting) what happens is a synchronous "entrainment" to our

activities and relationships, and we experience peak performance!

The next time you are doing an activity with a steady flow notice when the “flow” starts to break. You might sigh, look out the window, or have an urge to get up from your desk. That is your body’s subtle signal that it is going into a rest cycle. Following up on the signal by taking a break—if not 20 minutes, then five—results in higher quality work. Scientists have shown that when you ignore the rest signal and continue working, your chances of error are much greater. Just as the musician misses fewer notes when focused on the beat, so we all perform at peak levels when we heed our bodies’ natural rhythms.¹

Riding the Long Line

Another “tool” we can pick up from our musician friends who learn to play through their mistakes “without skipping a beat,” is the importance of *movement*, in and of itself. Here is where focus on the long line becomes paramount. When mistakes (drama) occur, the musician keeps going precisely because the ultimate focus is on the long line. The business world’s concern with adjustment to *change* (“change management,” “Who moved my cheese?”²) illustrates the recognition that *there is always movement*. The challenge we are having is that today’s tempo seems a bit quicker than yesterday’s! Roz Zander and Ben Zander spoke eloquently about the importance of a focus on the long line in their book, *The Art of Possibility*.³ Simply the *recognition of the rhythmic flow* of the long line of your business, your daily responsibilities, even your relationships—making the conscious choice to *perceive* a steady movement—allows you to tap into a reservoir of energy that carries you forward, much like my march through the Blue Ridge Mountains, *moving with* rather than floundering or resisting, the natural flow of change. Is that not the movement that leads us to become more of ourselves?

In summary, the study of music offers us a wealth of “tools” that can have a profound effect on our performance in the workplace. Entrainment, keen sensitivity, and rhythm and flow all work in concert to enhance our work to the point where it no longer feels like work! The virtuoso performer makes it look easy, because it *is* easy!

¹ For further information on ultradian rhythms, see Ernest Lawrence Rossi and David Nimmons, *The 20 Minute Break: Reduce Stress, Maximize Performance, and Improve Health and Emotional Well-Being Using the New Science of Ultradian Rhythms* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc., 1991).

² Spenser Johnson, M.D., *Who Moved My Cheese?: An Amazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1998).

³ Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander, *The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000).

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