

## Navigating Embodied Practicing

Whether you have injury or discomfort, limited time in the practice room, lack of sleep that makes you too tired to physically practice, or just want to be more efficient in learning a piece - embodied practicing can be helpful.

Embodied practicing is practicing in which you engage your whole self - body, mind, emotions and multisensory awareness - in all you do. It has three main aspects:

- Learning the music away from the flute
- Imaginary practicing
- Practicing with the instrument

We'll examine each of these from the perspective of how to learn a new piece of music. Recently I've embarked on learning the Taktakishvili Sonata for the first time using this method, and I find it a rich and satisfying process.

### **Learning the music away from the flute**

This is the first step in learning any new piece – and can take place long before you pick up your flute. With the score at hand you can do it in bed, on a plane, or in the library. If you have recordings, great: if not, you have to hear everything (this is where a little piano background comes in handy.)

I study the piece for as long as it takes to feel like I have an understanding of the following:

- Analytical structure: what are the sections, how are they constructed, and how do they relate to one another
- Harmonic progressions: how they contribute to the emotional language of the piece (including where my part is in each chord)
- Emotional meaning of each movement, section and phrase
- Quality of movement needed to bring out the emotion (for example, if playing Syrinx, you want your body to feel very differently from the last movement of the Prokofiev Sonata)
- Function of articulation – how it enhances the meaning of the phrases
- Similarities and differences between repeated sections and the function of each section

I do this work with and without recordings. I endeavor to feel everything that I learn, so that the structure and emotions are in my body before I ever touch the flute. Basically, I am learning the music without my flute.

### **Imaginary practicing**

Imaginary practicing – what some people call “mental practicing” - is an efficient and effective way to learn notes away from the instrument. A friend does an experiment every year at the college where she teaches: she divides her flute class into two groups and gives each group the same piece to learn in a week. One group learns it the traditional way and the other must learn it without touching the flute. She has done this for years, and each year the group that doesn't touch their flute can play the piece better than the other group. That's enough evidence for me, but if you want to look into the official research there are several sources<sup>i</sup>.

Imaginary practicing is much more than reading or singing the music. It means imagining everything you do to play – finger movement, breathing, embouchure changes, dynamics, articulation, expression, etc – all with a multisensory awareness. That is, you include in your awareness the way your body feels, what you hear in the environment, and what you see, with your main focus on the music.

This is most useful for working on difficult passages. Let's say you have a run going up high with a diminuendo. Imagine the following:

- Fingerings. If you can't imagine your fingers moving clearly and precisely for every note, you are thinking too fast. Choose a tempo where you can really feel each note, then gradually speed up. Remember: don't actually move your fingers. Just imagine the movement. You are training the neuromuscular connections, and it's easier for the brain if you don't actually use the muscles. Memorize the difficult fingerings and go over and over them until they feel natural. If they are memorized you can even practice on the subway or bus or in line at the bank!
- Dynamics. What do you have to do with your body as you make a diminuendo going up in to the high register? Feel the ground more? Make sure you don't tense your neck? Change

your embouchure? Change your air speed or amount? Change the resonance in your body? You want every note to sound focused, so you need to know exactly how to feel each one in your body.

- **Articulation.** What tonguing and slurs do you use? How does the tonguing feel – crisp, legato, etc? Where do you place the tongue in your mouth? How much effort do you use? In general we use way too much effort in tonguing, so practice letting the air carry the phrase, not the tongue.
- **Breathing.** Where will you breathe? Have you found places that work best to bring out the phrases? Are you gauging the descent of the ribs to match the length of the phrase, or are you pushing the air out too fast and running out? (Singing helps to discover the most expressive way to manage the air.) Are you letting your body do the work or are you overworking to breathe? Since the body seems to be calmer while doing imaginary practicing, this is a great time to work on the movement of breathing.
- **Expression.** How are you using your body to create the emotion you want for this phrase? Are you tensing in the arms, legs or neck as you diminuendo or reach the peak of the phrase? Can you instead feel increased support from the floor as you ascend? High notes have very fast vibrations and need a good grounded connection through your legs to the floor.

As you can see, there is a great deal going on while you are learning music!

Neuroscientists say making music is one of the most complex activities we do. In order to effectively coordinate all this brain activity, we need to go slowly and deliberately enough to make sure we are creating the music with the expression we intend. Practicing in an embodied manner away from the instrument while imagining everything we do really helps to build coordination in a free and expressive way.

### **Regular practicing**

Finally we get to playing!! I promise you that if you do all the previous work first, when you actually pick up your flute you will learn the piece relatively rapidly because you will already have it in your body.

It can be really effective to practice a phrase in our imagination and then with the instrument:

back and forth, back and forth – to see if we are doing in reality what we have imagined. Or, to see if we are adding unnecessary work when we pick up the flute. Then we use the metronome to get up to the desired speed – still with an awareness of the freedom and use of the whole body that we need for rapid technique. If there are passages that are difficult (or very high and hard on the ears), this is a really useful way to practice. For example, if you have a low register passage that you practice for half an hour your hands will get tired, but if you alternate with imaginary practicing you will have more endurance.

Most of the music we play has parts that are easy and parts that are hard. When first looking at a piece notice what seems hard and make these sections into etudes that you can do with your daily warm-ups. For example, in the TakTak there are a lot of high C's. It's been a while since I've been up in the stratosphere on a regular basis, so I am including that in all my warm-ups. This will provide a foundation for similar passages in the music. Don't spend a lot of time practicing the easy parts. Learn to embody them in your imagination and they will be just fine.

Practicing in an embodied manner helps us to trust our bodies when it comes to performance, where we hope to use our whole being to convey the meaning of the music. Clarity of musical intention will make it possible to play what you want.

I invite you to experiment with embodied practicing. Let me know how it goes!

<sup>i</sup> A good place to start is: Freymuth, Malva. Mental Practice and Imagery for Musicians. St. Louis, MO: MMB Music, 1999.