

Practicing and Powers of the Will: Mind, Body, and Ear

When we listen to musicians, we witness the power of performers expressing their conscious depth of intellect, emotional sensibility, stylistic conception, and technical faculty. In training ourselves, practice and repetitive exercises are widely understood among instrumentalists, yet there is another aspect of the word: the application of ideas, beliefs, or methods, into the *practice* of the art. This is achieved through education, which is an important consideration for our own practicing, and especially important when teaching inexperienced students, who may suffer from tension, anxiety, boredom, or emotions, that inhibit their practicing results. As a teacher I find it helpful to offer students a three-part approach to training and practice, namely: Mind, Body, and Ear.

To understand what I mean by educational practice, a few helpful definitions are in order, and I paraphrase from, Pedagogy – A Treatise on Pedagogy for Young Teachers, 1884, by *Edwin C. Hewitt*, LL.D., in which he states:

Power is the ability to do something.

Intellect is the power by which we know. It involves presentation, representation, reflection, and intuition, as well as memory and remembering, imagination and potential, comparison and judgment.

Sensibility is the power by which we feel. It involves the appetites of our senses, creating desires and emotional responses to these desires.

Will is the power by which we choose and execute.

Faculty is any power under the control of the will, which has specific work of its own to do. These willful faculties are reflected in *Consciousness*, the power of the mind to know its own actions and states, *Attention*, the power of the mind to bring all its force to bear on one thing, and *Conception*, the power by which we see with the mind's eye.

He lists Four Fundamental Truths of Pedagogy:

1. Any power under the control of the will may be cultivated or trained.
2. The powers are trained in only one way, viz. by wise use. This law of work is the one unchangeable law of progress everywhere.
3. The wisest training will be directed to those powers that are conspicuously active at the time of use.
4. An indispensable prerequisite to any profitable training is careful attention to the matter at hand.

Hewitt believed that all education was the development of the faculties, or germs of power, in a person, and the training of them into harmonious action in obedience to the laws of reason and morality. He felt that all education was cultured growth, and that the powers to be educated included physical (body), intellectual (mind), and moral powers. For my purposes, musical awareness – hearing are the musicians moral power. OK, enough of Hewitt.

By *Mind* I mean the mental conception, understanding and intention. By *Body* I mean your physical state and response to the mental impulses, and the *Ear* completes the triad, as the sense used in judgment of the resulting performance. All three of these affect our practicing and combine to form a feedback loop, working together as an inseparable whole: a natural mental, neural, and physical/aural network.

We all have a mind's eye, which is simply the way things seem to you in your imagining. And of course the more you know about what it is you practice, the more complete is your understanding. Thus it is important to know rhythm, harmony, melody, form, and expressive elements, and to analyze these in regard to music and technique. This knowledge sharpens your musical vision and helping you to maintain mental awareness and focus, both of which sharpen and expand through practice. Apart from knowledge, a very important aspect of mind is embracing an attitude, and especially staying calm, which enables us to manage thoughts and avoid frustration. With a controlled state of mind our practice becomes meditative and self-aware. A slow patient process of mental impetus, physical response, and aural judgment; relaxed and controlled instead of hurried. The repetition of drills becomes purposeful and relaxed, not frustrating. Frustration is a negative misinterpretation of a limitation, generally due to impatience, and it is through identifying these situations, a detection of unease, that should be identified as an opportunity for learning. We should identify those situations where the body is tense, or flinching, or when the butterflies form in your chest, or when you vocalize your displeasure. These are the exact places to focus your attention. They are diagnostic, and often occur when the body and/or the ear are taking control before the mental conception is solidified. Reading books, keeping journals, getting rest, eating right, exercise, meditation, are all excellent ways to improve the mental aspect of your playing. An experienced teacher should also serve as a *mentor*, providing advice and counsel, as well as method and regimen. They can guide and proscribe, saving you time by customizing your learning to your developmental needs.

Musicians perform from the mind, and the body and the ear are very important to the expression. Our mental conception is our impetus, and it must come first. During the initial mental phase we must embrace slowness and relaxation. If we rush, the body and ear will step in and blur our mental vision and focus. It is important to see the notes and rhythms, understand concept, the articulation, the phrase, the rhythm, the air, whatever it is you intend to attain or master in your practice. To do this you must find the tempo of 100% success, and that will usually be very, very slow, even and note-by-note. This slow focused approach must be done without hurry and sustained without anxiety. Remain accepting and rid yourself of expectations of achievement. Just observe.

Now as we repeat a passage, or drill, the body and the ear will begin to attune themselves. With more repetition they will begin to become part of the vision that began the skill process. Like walking and talking at the same time (just imagine the process you went through to do that) your practice develops into a new, but very

natural, neural/aural feedback loop. As the tempo increases, now the mind is able to let go and simply visualize, as the body and the ear take over, and you quite literally become the music you are playing. This is very much like acquiring language skill and kinesthetic techniques at the same time, and why I assert that musicians are excellent at multi-tasking.

In addressing the *Body*, I mean that your practice should bring about a physical state and ability to respond to your mental impulses. As instrumentalists much of this is concerned with managing muscle tension during an aerobic performance. Conceptually you should consider your state of relaxation. Are you physically balanced and natural? How is your stance? Are your fingers relaxed and naturally curved, and are you squeezing or using excessive motion? Shoulders? What about your embouchure? Is there any pressure or excessive motion? Breathing and air support are also important to conceive. There is always tension used in the abdominal muscles. Is this tension spreading? What about your oxygen? Without enough your mind cannot stay focused on the task? Are you fatigued? If you are having trouble focusing, you may actually need physical rest. To help with physical awareness I would suggest practicing in front of a mirror, using a metronome, a stopwatch, setting up a practice routine, playing for peer critique, and getting video of your live performance. A great teacher will be attuned to your physical expression at all times, pointing out tension and offering ergonomic solutions. They will save you valuable time in mastering the physical dimension of your playing, and as you continue practicing, over time you become more profoundly aware of your physical state.

By *ear*, I really mean hearing. All musicians must develop a profound and highly refined mental awareness of what it is they are hearing. In this way the ear is used in judgment, giving us our understanding. This enables us to work towards an ideal. The ear approves when the results satisfy our intent. Thus it is very important to train our ears in every way, and extremely important that we protect them from harm. Interpretation of what we are hearing is paramount. It takes time, and changes with experience over time. Listening to live and recorded music, as well as recording yourself, using a tuner, playing very close to a wall, are all excellent ways to refine your listening skills. I would also suggest that enhancing listening awareness is much the job of a good teacher, as they have more experience and skill. If they are listening connoisseurs, they will hear things in your playing, that might not be readily apparent to you. They will also be able to help you focus on important expressive details that you might be missing. We must continually strive deepen our understanding. In music, listening is the doorway to understanding.