

Between flow and anxiety: A study of the factors affecting musicians' performances

Roberta Antonini Philippe¹, Céline Kosirnik¹, Esther Ortuño², and Michele Biasutti³

¹ PHASE Lab, Institute of Sport Sciences, University of Lausanne, Switzerland

² Institute of Psychology, University of Lausanne, Switzerland

³ Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Pedagogy, and Applied Psychology, University of Padova, Italy

INTRODUCTION

A musical performance is a complex activity requiring the articulation and synchronization of multiple cognitive, motor, psychological, and emotional processes [1]. In addition, the musician is often exposed to situations that can generate stress, distress [2] or even anxiety. Indeed, musical careers take place in very competitive settings, and musicians have to cope such stressful events as public performances, examinations, and music competitions which often cause them music performance anxiety (MPA) [3].

How could they cope with MPA?

Through the flow state theory, informal strategies could be highlighted and productive means for coping with MPA could be underlined [4]. *Flow* is a positive state during which people are motivated and focused on performing a gratifying activity [5] and could suggest unexplored ways of controlling MPA. In fact, levels of MPA are low during the best performances [6], and a flow state can raise performers to a state of grace which counters anxiety [7 ; 8 ; 9].

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Music performance anxiety (MPA)

MPA can be defined as “a marked fear or anxiety about one or more social situations in which the individual is exposed to possible scrutiny by others.” [10]. This form of anxiety can be detrimental to good performance.

Flow

Flow research has highlighted several factors which can help to define an optimal experience:

1) a balance between challenge and skill; 2) the merger of action and awareness; 3) clear goals; 4) unambiguous feedback; 5) concentration on the task; 6) a sense of control; 7) a loss of self-consciousness; 8) a distorted sense of time; and, 9) an autotelic experience [4].

OBJECTIVES

The present study aimed at examining the links between states of anxiety and flow to outline unexplored facets of distress and optimal experiences with the objectives to:

1. Improve the understanding of factors affecting performance
2. Define applied indications for musicians to recognize the characteristics and causes of anxiety and the processes that could counteract this state.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Participants

- Six professional musicians (two men, four women) and five student musicians (three men, two women)
- Aged from 18–30 years old (M = 25; SD = 5.3)
- Instruments played: cello (1), viola (1), piano (2), bass (1), violin (2), trumpet (2), or voice (1)

Procedure and methods

Musicians were asked to recall two different experiences:

1. One in which they had felt very comfortable and totally immersed in the performance
2. An experience in which they felt uncomfortable, anxious, or stressed

The data was collected in the form of graphs drawn by the musicians and recordings/transcripts of the interviews.

Data analysis

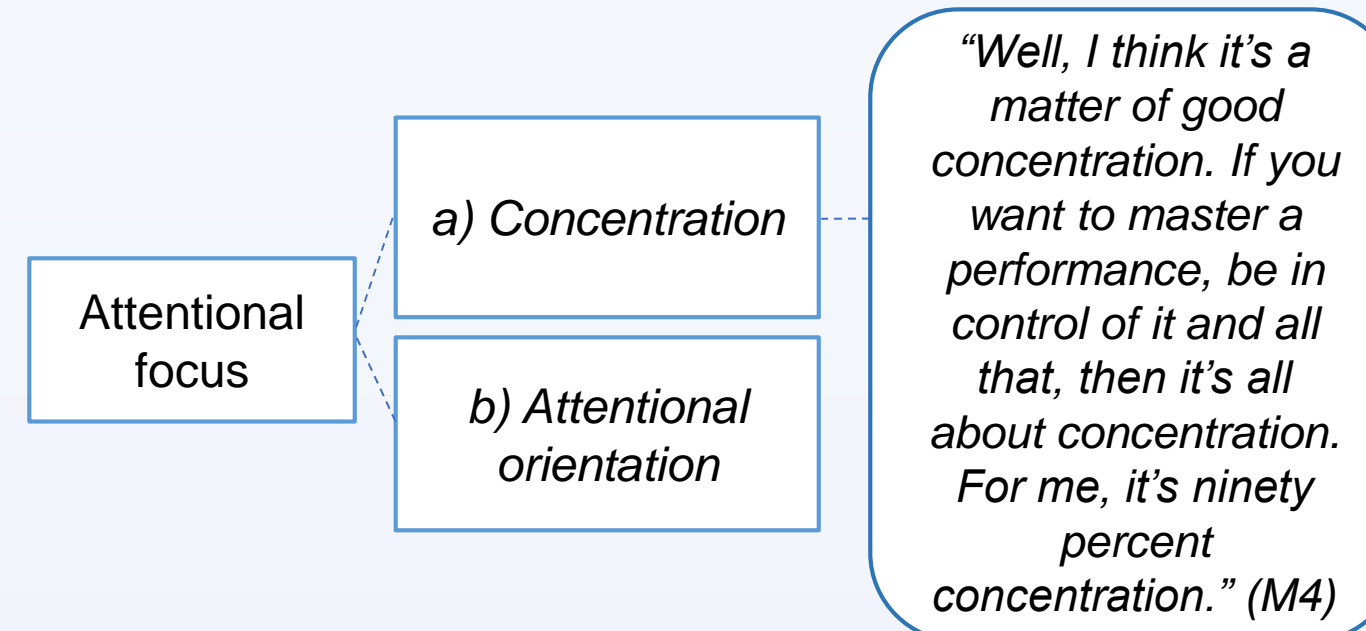
No software was used in any stage of the analysis: all coding and grouping were done by hand. Data were analyzed using a thematic inductive approach involving several steps [11 ; 12]

RESULTS

Factors promoting flow

The following seven categories emerged as factors promoting flow: 1) Social standing, 2) Type of preparation, 3) Connection to one's body, 4) Awareness of skills and self-confidence, 5) Intrinsic motivation, 6) Attentional focus, and 7) Transcendence.

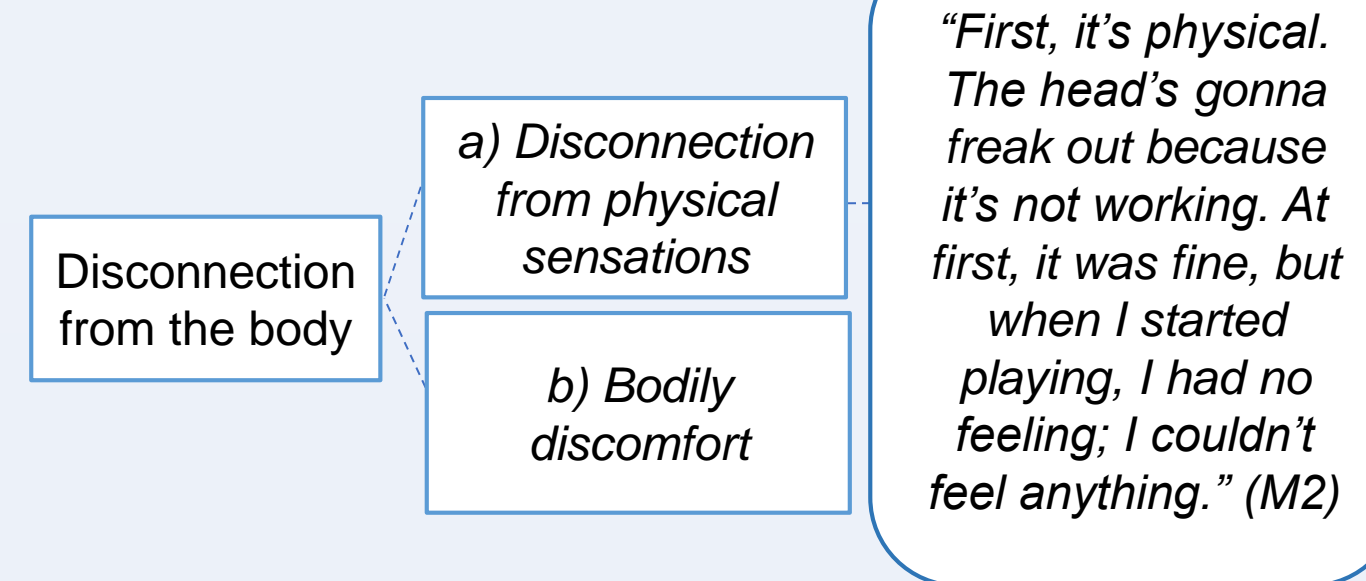
Example of results:



Factors leading to performance anxiety

The following seven categories emerged as factors leading to performance anxiety: 1) Social and environmental conditions, 2) Type of preparation, 3) Disconnection from the body, 4) Lack of knowledge, skills, and self-confidence, 5) Lack of motivation, 6) Dysfunctional attentional focus, and 7) Disruptive thoughts.

Example of results:



CONCLUSION AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings revealed many different factors which conditioned performance. The results enabled to consider performance itself along a continuum whose two extremes relate to the two phenomena studied, namely flow and anxiety.

The results obtained also make it possible to show the range of aspects on which it seems relevant to work as a musician. From a practical point of view, the mental or psychological preparation seems to be an essential element in optimizing a musician's potential and enabling him to resist pressure [13].

REFERENCES

- (1) Williamon, A. (2002). Memorising music. In J. Rink (Ed.), *Musical Performance: A Guide to Understanding* (pp. 113-126). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511811739.009
- (2) Habe, K., Biasutti, M., & Kajitna, T. (2019). Flow and satisfaction with life in elite musicians and top athletes. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10(698), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00698>
- (3) Casanova, O., Zarza, F. J., & Orejudo, S. (2018). Differences in performance anxiety levels among advanced conservatory students in Spain, according to type of instrument and academic year of enrolment. *Music Education Research*, 20(3), 377-389. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2018.1433145>
- (4) Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal performance*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.
- (5) MacDonald, R., Byrne, C., & Carlton, L. (2006). Creativity and flow in musical composition: An empirical investigation. *Psychology of Music*, 34, 292–306. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735606064838>.
- (6) Kirchner, J. M., Bloom, A. J., & Skutnick-Henley, P. (2008). The relationship between performance anxiety and flow. *Medical Problems of Performing Artists*, 23(2), 59–65.
- (7) Cohen, S., & Bodner, E. (2020a). The relationship between flow and music performance anxiety amongst professional classical orchestral musicians. *Psychol. Music*, 47, 420–435. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735618754689>
- (8) Cohen, S., & Bodner, E. (2019). Flow and music performance anxiety: The influence of contextual and background variables. *Musicae Scientiae*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1029864919838600>
- (10) American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Washington, DC: APA.
- (9) Fullagar, C. J., Knight, P. A., & Sovern, H. S. (2013). Challenge/skill balance, flow, and performance anxiety. *Applied Psychology*, 62, 236–259. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.2012.00494.x>
- (11) Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- (12) Braun, V., Clarke, V., & Weate, P. (2016). Using thematic analysis in sport and exercise research. In B. Smith & A. C. Sparkes (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of qualitative research in sport and exercise* (pp. 191-205). London, UK: Routledge.
- (13) Williamon, A., & Antonini Philippe, R. (2020). Well-being in and through performance: Interdisciplinary perspectives from sports and music. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11(399), 1-3. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00399>