

Effortless effortfulness: Does musical tension need a tense performer?

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Aims

My aim in preparing this recital was to apply some of the principles learned in the course of Alexander Technique lessons that originated a process of change in my study habits and patterns of tension. I chose two works that I have been playing for many years (Berio's *Sequenza* and Delgado's *Panic Flirt*), and two works I started practicing recently (*Cassandra's Dream Song* by Brian Ferneyhough and Tinoco's *The Delirium of my Desire*).

In the preparation of the recital I tried to clarify how each piece posed tension problems, and which elements created musical tension. The question that I raised was whether the player can evoke the musical tension intended without translating it in unnecessary or detrimental muscular tension or body movement, and if the audience will feel the need to see the effort and tension in the body of the performer. This recital is part of the process of trying to find an answer that will necessarily be subjective and many questions remain unanswered.

Context

Effort and tension are misleading words used in different contexts that can evoke contradictory reactions. This recital is a reflection on the meanings of those words. Muscular tension, musical tension, emotional tension and intensity, although often overlapping, are not the same and should not be confused.

When in the presence of great masters of any art, it strikes us how they achieve extraordinary feats effortlessly. We assume they are able to do extraordinary things without effort, but in reality what happens is that, because they learned how to avoid unnecessary effort, they manage to do extraordinary feats. Subtle as it may seem, this difference is of the utmost importance. People tend to try harder when they should try less.

A flautist must discipline fingers, breath, tongue, mind and body in order to attain control over them in musical performance, and in order to do this efficiently, he must minimize the effort and have a clear perception of the amount of muscular tension needed. Which muscles to tense, how much and when, are important factors that, when not successfully managed, can compromise the quality of the performance and the well-being of the performer. But the performance itself must evoke undisciplined, frenzied emotions in those who hear, creating "tension". A saying attributed to Richard Strauss expresses clearly my point: it is the audience who should sweat, not the musician. That

is, a musician ought to create excitement rather than get excited. Conveying musical tension with economy of physical tension, being in control but pretending to be on the verge of losing it, are some of the problems posed by the works on this recital.

The program

<i>Sequenza I</i> (1958)	Luciano Berio
<i>The Delirium of my Desire: a conseguenza for solo flute</i> (2006)	Luís Tinoco
<i>Cassandra's Dream Song</i> (1970)	Brian Ferneyhough
<i>Panic Flirt</i> (1992)	Alexandre Delgado

Berio's and Ferneyhough's works are two landmarks of the 20th-century solo flute repertoire that inspired two works by Portuguese composers. Luís Tinoco's *The Delirium of my Desire* is a tribute to Luciano Berio, and uses short fragments of the flute *Sequenza* that are reordered and gradually changed, giving way to a delirious final emancipated from the original material. Alexandre Delgado's *Panic Flirt* is more of a humorous rebuttal of Ferneyhough's complexities with flirt and panic struggling as the two musical characters of the piece. Delgado claims contemporary music need not be neurotic by covering the scores with black ink.

In the *Sequenza*, Berio challenges the habits of coordination of the classical flute technique and, in *Cassandra's Dream Song*, Brian Ferneyhough, by exploring the limits of notation, puts unusual demands on the flutist claiming that the tension created is an integral part of his aesthetics.

With my background playing early instruments, I tried to compare a score of Baroque music filled with all the performance information available with the *Sequenza* or *Cassandra's* score. A comparison of the notation of Ferneyhough's *Cassandra's Dream Song* for flute and the Adagio in Quantz's *Essay on the True Art of Playing the Flute* with all the dynamic and articulation markings implicit in the written explanations, shows that the density of performance directions is comparable.

The precise notation of these subtleties would lead to scores as complex as Brian Ferneyhough's, who, in a kind of symmetrical attitude, tried to notate all the subtleties of the language he had in his imagination. Learning early music style by reading the treatises, without aural models, or by covering the score with information on micro-dynamics, articulation shadings and timing subtleties can be as complex as learning Ferneyhough's works with a classical background and an illegible score in hand. But since the notation is a representation of an idea, once the idea becomes clear to the reader, most of the information in the score is chunked and what seemed unplayable becomes playable and fluent. Once that factor of tension is missing does the interpretation become less interesting? Apparently Brian Ferneyhough thought so, for as Pierre-Yves Artaud came to master the piece playing it with ease, he decided that, in order to keep the parameter of tension in the level he pretended, he ought to write a new piece with an even more complicated score that would challenge Artaud's capacities. So he composed *Unity Capsule*, a 17-minute long score with so much information that reading it becomes a true jugglers feat. This aesthetical attitude of Ferneyhough suggested the title of the recital: since I refuse the idea that more tension by the

performer is essential to create musical tension, some of the tension must be faked so that by doing less we achieve more. Therefore effortless effortfulness.

Methodology

The main sources of tension are contrasts (dynamics, register and articulation) and the notation. In order to diminish the delay of the translation of the reading of the contrasts and the realization of them in sound, a lot of mental practice was used.

Some unusual practice strategies, to become aware of degrees of tension and body movement involved in playing, were used. Playing in awkward body positions, squatting, walking forwards and backwards, leaning against a wall, moving up when the melody goes down. Playing with the flute supported in a frame designed for the purpose, so the points that support the weight of the instrument become free and the jerkiness of the movements of the fingers become apparent and can be minimized.

Unusual (for Classical music) combinations of changes of the parameters of register, dynamics and articulation tend to generate conflicting programs in the performer, and there is a tendency to create a “detrimental synergy”, in which the combination of two difficulties becomes more difficult than the sum of the parts. Strategies inspired by Pedro de Alcantara’s *Indirect procedures* were devised. Playing on the same register while fingering high notes or big jumps, to detect how the difficulty of an interval is translated in finger tension in an otherwise simple finger movement; strategic stops before and after the contrasts; reversing the parameters, etc.

Several Alexander lessons in which the flute was played were taken, and video recording and mirrors were used.

Conclusions

One of the basic assumptions of the Alexander Technique is the so-called unreliable sensory appreciation: the tremendous gap between what we are doing and what we think we are doing. So, when drawing conclusions about matters of tension control and body awareness and use, we risk expressing obvious common sense ideas everyone adheres to, but most will not practice (while probably think they do).

Some general conclusions can be drawn. There’s little novelty in them, but in the process of practicing for this recital, they became extremely obvious to me:

-Each contrast tends to manifest itself in the body of the player in the form of a contraction or sudden movement before it is realized in sound. When that contraction or movement is inhibited or at least delayed, the contrast is clearer, more extreme and easier to obtain.

-Too much mental practice without alternating with real playing can be as detrimental as too much playing without alternating with mental practice.

-Knowing where, when and how much tension is needed is important, but not enough. If our habits go against that knowledge, we will not act accordingly when the moment comes, for our “system” will not believe possible to obtain the result desired with that muscular set. We will still press harder with the fingers to play fortissimo or to hold a difficult high note. To circumvent this kind of problems, a lot of persistence together with unusual strategies is needed.

-Changing the way I had been playing the *Sequenza* was more difficult and involved a lot more practice than learning *Cassandra’s Dream Song* anew.

-When after long practice a section became easy, I started missing some of the “musical tension” I felt when playing it before greater control was achieved. Sometimes I tried to compensate by increasing the difficulty (by increasing the speed or overdoing the contrasts). Although I felt there was more “tension” in the performance, listening to the recording showed that the result was not so.

As a work in process, only after analysing the recital can more conclusions be drawn, but the most important of all is that clarifying the process of solving problems is more efficient than having the solution. The important, as Alexander wrote, is “not having it but getting it”.

Bibliography

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