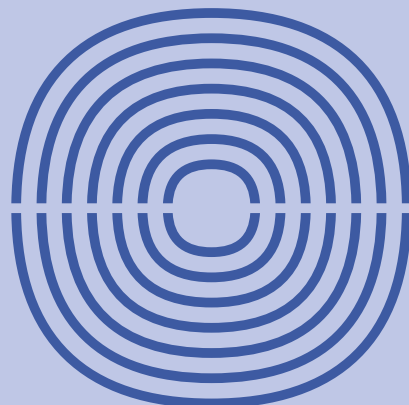


Harald Jørgensen (Ed.)

## Teaching about practising



**Norges  
musikkhøgskole**  
Norwegian Academy  
of Music

**CEMPE**

Centre of Excellence in  
Music Performance Education



# Teaching about practising

Harald Jørgensen (Ed.)

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# Preface

The six studies described in this booklet were carried out under the auspices of the *Centre of Excellence in Music Performance Education (CEMPE)* at the Norwegian Academy of Music (NMH) as a contribution to the project “Learning how to Practise”. The project aims to involve principal instrument teachers in a development project on teaching students how to practise. Practice is a major part of the lives of music performance students, and they should of course be given guidance on how to do it. We should not assume that everyone enrolling in higher music education is fully aware of what quality practice actually entails. A survey at the NMH found that around 40% of new students claimed they had been given little or no guidance on how to practise from their previous teachers. Their past teachers may well take a different view, but the students’ perceptions still show how important it is to include practice as a central topic in higher music education.

Each project was initiated and run by a principal instrument teacher or one or more principal instrument teachers in partnership with an external teacher. The six teachers also formed a group (the “staff group”) with a common objective: to discuss each other’s projects.

Although each teacher and student’s progress during the course of the project was important, the programme was primarily intended to add to a knowledge base to help redefine certain institutional parameters to ensure effective teaching of practice strategies. This shift in perspective will not be achieved in a year. The aim is to implement it over a period of 3–4 years. Of course, the students will be given “ordinary” tuition, but they and their teachers will also be making verbal and written observations about what they are doing and what insights these activities give the teacher and the student.

The main project will run for three academic years (from 2014 to 2017) with new participants and projects every year.

Norwegian Academy of Music, June 2015

Harald Jørgensen  
Professor Emeritus  
Project Manager



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# 1 “If you are sitting there staring out of the window, you are lacking concentration” Focused and meaningful practice

*Jorunn Marie Bratlie and Harald Jørgensen<sup>1</sup>*

## 1.1. Topic

From time to time we all find our mind wandering when it should be focusing on a particular task. Over a period of three weeks piano teacher Jorunn Marie Bratlie and three of her students set out to explore this issue in detail. On each practice day the students were asked to pick an excerpt or exercise that they would then work on in detail for 20 minutes. They should not just practise “as normal” but also write down their thoughts and actions as and when they materialised during the practice session, triggered by questions such as:

- Why do I repeat something?
- What do I need to improve?
- Which practice strategies (“tools”) could I use to improve a specific passage?

Such questions are normally asked and answered the moment they arise and without stopping to make further reflections. The reason for asking the students to put their reflections down on paper was to make them stay focused and not allow them to avoid the task. Another objective was to better enable the students to analyse their own practice in order to make better use of their practice time.

## 1.2. Project framework

The three students were Student 1 (male), Student 2 (female), and Student 3 (female). All three were enrolled on the bachelor programme. To prepare the

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<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor Jorunn Marie Bratlie ran the project, while Harald Jørgensen produced a report based on information obtained from the teacher and students through interviews and written statements.

students for the project, the teacher allowed them to spend some of their piano lessons practising. She would occasionally intervene and ask the students why they practised the way they did and what they would like to change. For example, one of the students was practising an exercise where the main objective was to create forward momentum. As she began to practise finger strength, very slowly, the teacher asked: “What are you trying to achieve with this exercise? Why do you think this way of practising will help create momentum?” Was slow practice a standard routine for her, regardless of the purpose of the exercise?

The students met the request for daily observations of a 20-minute practice session in different ways. One student wrote down everything she did during practice for three weeks, providing a detailed account of a 20-minute session on each day of practice. Another student did the same for the first week but was less diligent in subsequent weeks. The last student reported that he “didn’t write something every single day, but I have written a little bit, at least”. Two of the students handed copies of their notes to the teacher, while the third submitted selected notes by email. The notes were used as a starting point for discussion during the one-to-one lessons and a couple of piano classes.

One student had experience of keeping a practice diary in which repertoire and exercises were noted down along with the timings for each of them. None of the three had any experience of taking notes while practising with the express aim of staying focused and questioning their own practice methods.

Students often find that different exercises require varying degrees of concentration. A study of German conservatoire students found that they felt practising a “problem” usually required the most concentration while practising familiar material required the least.<sup>2</sup> The NMH project described here did not distinguish between different types of tasks – the students themselves chose what to practise during the 20-minute periods.

A month after the project was completed, the three students were interviewed as a group. The quotes below illustrate the general gist of what they had to say.

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2 Lehmann, A. C. (2002). Effort and enjoyment in deliberate practice: A research note. In: I. M. Hanken, S. G. Nielsen & M. Nerland (Eds.), *Research in and for Higher Music Education. Festschrift for Harald Jørgensen*, pp. 55–67. Oslo: Norwegian Academy of Music, NMH Research Publications 2002:2.

### 1.3. What did they practise and what did they write down?

Student 1 made notes in keyword form along the way. He then wrote them out as a résumé for the teacher. The student addressed and investigated technical challenges such as *leggiere* playing, for example, where he created exercises focusing on the transitions between different hand positions. He tried to “achieve a good and fast *leggiere* with compact fingers, close to the keys”. He considered his first attempt to be “not smooth enough” and therefore split the sequence into its constituent segments: three hand positions. He only played the transitions between these hand positions, because he felt that “the problem must lie in the transitions”. He felt that this yielded results, although he observed “unnaturally heavy pressure on the first note of each new position”. Next he attempted the segments by “playing the first note of each section as quietly as possible”, with the other notes “*mezzo forte* and *staccato* in clusters”. His conclusion: after practising both exercises a while “the result was as good as it could be in 20 minutes”.

Other exercises performed in the same way included finger work involving different sitting postures with focus on heaviness versus lightness of the arm; exercises to help discern all the notes in a chord; and trill exercises.

Student 2 made notes as she practised a piece by Grieg and a piece by Plagge. Her practice involved specific challenges of both a technical and musical nature. For example, she experimented with different colours of sound and phrasing to try to convey the image of a “bird”. She worked on one particular bar in order to “get the feeling of connecting properly with the keys”, and she learnt all the chords in a passage by “playing them slowly and saying all the notes out loud so that the brain also became involved in the practice process”. She made notes of things that worked well, and she gave an evaluation of each practice session focusing more on what could be improved, e.g. “could have been more conscious of which ‘version’ I actually preferred”, and “how do I create a sound that fits the lyrics and message?”. This student also noted that on one occasion when the lights in the practice room went out, she “started listening to her phrasing in a completely new way”.

Student 3 practised the first movement of Grieg’s piano concerto. She was due to perform it in concert after the end of the project. During the interview she said that “there were places where I would feel physical pain. I made several notes about this

and tried to get to the bottom of it". She describes this with keywords in her practice notes such as "tired, pain on top of the hand + under the wrist", and "relax after the chord", or "painful = top of the arm (piano feels heavier than usual), relax, don't tense up, focus on the 1s", or "tensing up quickly, remember you can let go of the octaves between each one". The notes mostly address what she was practising and what she wanted to work on, what her goal was. For example: "Transition to arpeggios (practise only transition l.h.), aim for 1"; "perfect 1 bar at a time, concentrate on the bass line"; "use the fingers on the Waterfall, use the wrist on the ascent, go for it and don't let l.h. jump around so much"; "run through it once slowly, focus on making the semiquavers even"; "imbalance between thumb-index fingers l.h., practise just these two in all transitions." Towards the end of the period there was more of this: "play through once at speed to find out where it's going wrong", "play through at speed, look for errors, repeat until good", and "play trough with eyes closed, memorise."

#### **1.4. Did the experiment have an impact on the way they practised?**

All three students noted some benefits from the project. Student 1 claimed that he "spent the 20 minutes trying to analyse 'live' what I was doing and how I solved problems and created new challenges. This highlighted and concretised a process that was perhaps a bit more abstract than before. Every time I practise I do pretty much what I did during the project, but I've never been asked to think about what I do while I'm doing it, as we were in this project". He insisted that "you can never be *too* aware" and recommended splitting a practice hour up into two or three segments with a 5-minute break in between, "because if you carry on for an hour, you could wake up and realise you've played the same bit three times without thinking. It's better to do shorter and more focused sessions". Moreover, he had come to the following realisation: "I can still gain a lot more by focusing and concentrating harder instead of just playing through the piece."

Student 2 said she focused a great deal on being attentive and aware throughout the entire practice session. She described the effects of the project thus: "I became a bit more conscious of paying attention to detail, about zooming into a section of the piece and working out how much time I should spend on it. This awareness of 'why am I doing this, what's to be gained from it?' makes me reflect on how

I practise rather than just practise for practice’s sake.” She also stressed how important it is to “keep your head with you” and felt that it is beneficial to “take a break, do some stretching and return with renewed energy rather than keep going for an hour with the same energy levels”. She also made the following observation: “I’m not good at taking breaks.”

In response to the question of whether there was “anything to be gained from taking notes during the practice session”, the third student said: “Writing things down made me more aware of things.” This student said she had struggled with her concentration but had been able to work out how long she could practise in one go without losing focus – which was half an hour on each item. She takes breaks every hour, saying that “when working on a big piece that I need to learn, I will usually spend half an hour on that, 10 minutes on something else, then half an hour on the piece etc. in order give myself a break. And I create a plan. This makes it easier to see how much time I’ve got, that there is an end to my practice session, and not to carry on practising until it’s good enough”.

As we can see, they all felt that they had learnt something from the project. The students’ comments show that they were better able to manage their concentration and that they had probably got better at analysing their own practice, allowing them to make better use of their practice time. The question is whether these are lasting results. After the project, Students 1 and 2 stopped taking notes. Their reasoning was reflected in something Student 2 said: “After doing this for a week I was able to think about it without writing it down. I now spend more time thinking and not just playing.” If they keep this up, the diary method will at least have served part of its purpose by steering the students towards a way of thinking that boosts their concentration. Student 3 continued to note down what she was practising and how long she spent practising.

For her part, the teacher feels that “shining a spotlight on focused practice has helped open the eyes of Student 1 in terms of what to listen out for while practising. Student 2 seems to have become more aware of what she needs to practise and why. Student 3 continues to take a systematic approach, and she appears to apply more of the right ‘tools’ than before”. The teacher expects to have to return to the topic of practice regularly and bring it up at an early stage with new students.

The students’ experiences tally with the recommendations of practice research. Variation during practice, as described by Student 3, is considered important in order to maintain concentration. The German cellist and researcher Gerhard

Mantel<sup>3</sup> recommends practising with “rotating attention”. This involves rotating the exercises so that attention and concentration are “shifted” at regular intervals, thus making both easier to maintain.

## 1.5. Writing and cognition of thought processes during practice

Using writing for reflection is a well-established and acknowledged device based on cognitive psychology. It is therefore important to ascertain how the students put their written notes to use and whether this was a method that they would continue to adhere to. As expected, they applied the method in different ways, both in terms of what they wrote down and in terms of how much they wrote. The main issue was to adjust their writings to the ongoing performance process. One student says “I felt the problem was that it took so long writing things down. It was strange to read it back, because you think so much faster than you write, and then you lose the thought before you have put everything down on paper”. Legibility was also somewhat of an issue: “I couldn’t understand what I’d written,” as one of them put it.

Another reason could be confusion over what keeping a “practice diary” or “practice log” actually entails. Two of the students were initially opposed to the idea, because they “thought it had to be incredibly detailed: first create a plan, then describe the execution”. One of them wanted a “schedule describing what I will be practising from day to day, not the whole package”. Future experiments with written notes during practice should clearly spell out different alternatives with regard to content and scope and then try out individual solutions suited to the nature of the different exercises. By following up on the written notes they can also be tied in with the instrumental lessons and form a basis for discussion between teacher and student, for example.

One alternative to written notes is audio or video recordings whereby the student comments on what he or she is doing in real time. The teacher drew the same conclusion, saying that “writing interrupts the practice process and can be demotivating when you’re in full ‘*practice flow*’”. The method is used in education research to establish which thoughts emerge during a problem-solving process. Studying

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3 Mantel, G. (1987). *Cello üben. Eine Methodik des Übens für Streicher*. Mainz: Schott.

these thoughts can help identify mannerisms and bad habits and inspire new ways of thinking. The method has been applied in several research projects on music practice, including by Professor Siw G. Nielsen at the Norwegian Academy of Music<sup>4</sup>. The students are open to adopting this method, saying that “the best option is video or audio recording, and thinking out loud”. One key opportunity to strengthen the link between practice room and teaching room lies in the fact that recordings can be presented to the teacher for comment and form part of the process of learning how to practise.

If all we want to do is reduce the number of times that our concentration fails, we can do as they did in an American experiment. A group of students were asked to draw a line on a piece of paper every time they found that they lost concentration, hoping that this would reduce the frequency of loss of concentration. It worked for many, but not all of the students<sup>5</sup>.

## 1.6. Conclusion

“If you are sitting there staring out of the window, you are lacking concentration.” This remark was made by one of the students, and there is no doubt that concentration is a real issue for the students.

This project illustrated opportunities and problems associated with making written notes while practising in order to aid concentration. The students said they had become more aware of how to practise and more creative in respect of exploring different practice methods instead of always pursuing the same path. The process has been of help with regard to being attentive while practising and not practising on autopilot.

These reactions date from one month after the project was completed. However, there is reason to ask which long-term effects the experiment has had, even if all

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- 4 For additional information, see the article ‘Self-regulation of learning strategies during practice: A case study of a church organ student preparing a musical work for performance’. In: H. Jørgensen & A. C. Lehmann (Eds), *Does practice make perfect? Current theory and research on instrumental music practice*, pp. 109–122. Oslo: Norwegian Academy of Music, NMH research publications 1997:1.
  - 5 Madsen, C. K., & Geringer, J. M. (1981). The effect of a distraction index on improving practice attentiveness and musical performance. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, No. 66/67, pp. 46–52.

three students claimed that they had learnt and taken on board a thing or two about concentration.

Although concentration during practice was the main theme of the project, issues such as planning the content of the practice session, allocating time to practice and breaks, evaluating the practice session and using notes were also touched upon.

## Relevant reading

Harald Jørgensen: *Undervisning i øving. En innføring for sang- og instrumental-lærere*. Norsk Musikforlag a/s, Oslo, 2011. Chapters: 'Å holde på konsentrasjon og oppmerksomhet', pp. 63–70, and 'Øvedagbok', pp. 125–126.



## 2 The transformation of a violinist

*Sander Tingstad and Morten Carlsen*

### 2.1. The student's story

I started my master studies in violin performance with Professor Morten Carlsen in autumn 2014. I had struggled for a long time with issues concerning unnecessary movement and excessive use of energy while playing. Virtually every teacher I played for commented on this and thought it was my single biggest challenge. Many of them felt I made things more difficult than they had to be and that my movements got in the way of both the technical and musical aspects of my playing.

I worked pretty hard to get rid of unnecessary movement when practising specific pieces, and had some success at that, but as soon as I started working on a new piece I was practically back to square one. Different teachers had suggested numerous solutions, but I had a feeling that they were only addressing the symptoms, not the cause of my problems. I also took Alexander Technique lessons, which helped address various tensions but did little to limit unnecessary movement.

I also had a few lessons with Morten during my bachelor studies. I felt that Morten was able to look beyond the “external symptoms” during these lessons, and he soon steered me towards an approach that addressed what I felt were the underlying causes.

My view was that the problems were primarily linked to my desire to express something, and that the more involved I got in my performance, the more I would move around. When Morten and I started working together, it quickly became clear that my bad habits were more deep-seated than I had thought. I had been assimilating them over a number of years and performed without conscious mind control. I could hardly do a thing on the violin without the problems manifesting themselves in one way or other.

Morten wanted to go into more detail than I had expected, but I soon realised it was necessary. For about a month, I put most of my repertoire to one side and focused on exercises that in themselves were basic but for me posed significant challenges in the beginning. Thinking that there is so much repertoire and more

complex technical challenges that you could be working on can make it difficult to accept that going back to basics in this way is the right thing to do. I probably benefited a great deal from taking a conscious approach, since it is important to find the right sort of motivation.

Once I got into it, I actually found it quite inspiring. In the beginning, we worked on specific exercises, and I could see where Morten was going. I soon made good progress and found satisfaction in mastering the simpler exercises. It is important to note, however, that most of the things we did were intended as experiments. The focus was not on achievement but rather on observing and discovering. We were really looking for light bulb moments.

Basic body balance was one of the first things we addressed. If, say, you lift one arm to one side while standing, the body will automatically move to the other side to create balance. This assumes that you allow the movement to take place. The idea was that these principles should be applied to all actions. For example, during a bow stroke, you would move one arm to one side, and you should then allow the body to perform a counter-movement.

Next, we did exercises where a complete movement (e.g. a complete bow stroke) was triggered by one single impulse. The impulse sets off and determines the entire subsequent movement. These exercises were quite challenging for me, because I was used to controlling every part of the movement. Exercises where the bow had to hit the string from above became especially important. In the moment before the bow hit the string I had a tendency to tense my muscles and control the stroke instead of sending an impulse at the outset and letting the bow strike the string as part of an overall movement. A whole series of movements can be considered a continuous motion, and the next movement could be an automatic reaction to the one before it.

In the summer of 2014, a couple of months before starting my master's, I attended a Timani course. Developed by Tina Margareta Nilssen, Timani is an approach to voice and instrumental practice that improves co-ordination of the body. You learn in great detail which muscles you should use and about the relationship between mind and body.

Tina felt that my exaggerated movements and tensions were due to my wanting to express something while lacking the fundamental body balance and support. When your co-ordination is not optimal, the signals from the brain to the muscles become muddled. When you then also fail to use your supporting muscles in the right way,

the body will automatically compensate and try to find the necessary energy – resulting in excessive movement and tension.

Even during my first session with Tina, I noticed that many of my habitual movements had become superfluous, and I quickly managed to produce a fuller and more open sound. Timani became an important part of my practice routines and worked brilliantly in combination with Morten's methods. Tina and Morten are both talking about many of the same things, but from different perspectives.

One of the key elements in my work has been what I call modes – what state of mind you are in when playing. How you listen, what you listen for, how you think, and how you relate to your own playing. The really interesting discovery was how my mental “mode” directly affected my pattern of movement.

Part of my problem was that I always tried to actively fill the music with something without having an adequate way of listening. I think if you try too hard to create the expression you are looking for, you can easily fall into the trap of listening more to how you want it to sound rather than how it actually sounds. I had to learn to allow the music to flow more and to be more observational and objective when listening. I think you have to keep a certain mental distance from your own playing. I have seen many really good performers who gave me the impression that they are observing their own performance from the outside. This is perhaps especially evident in pianists. Their fingers are working “automatically”, while they themselves are listening observers. This allows them to act and add that little bit extra, create a transition or, in the case of chamber music, respond to their fellow performers.

I think of this in terms of how active or passive you are while you play. As I said, I had a very active way of making music, whereby I would always try to create an expression and actively fill the music with something. The emotions I felt for the music were often not reflected in the sound I made, instead manifesting themselves in the form of tension and movement: my emotional expression was inextricably linked to extensive muscle use. As soon as I started to feel the passion, I began to use a lot of energy. This was something I had got used to over a long period of time. I had to learn that an expressive sound does not depend on tightening your muscles, to listen to the actual sound that I made, and to let the musical performance determine how much energy I should use. I also had to learn which muscles to use in order to create the desired expression and which muscles I could relax. The way I listened, and how I responded to what I heard, had a direct effect on

these aspects. Even after I had adopted a healthy pattern of movement, whatever mode I was in still determined whether I was able to limit muscle use and movement during a performance. This meant I had to take a more passive approach to my playing than I had been used to.

Also important is ensuring that the musical ideas are clear. Morten and I worked a lot on that. Having a clear idea about how the music should sound means I automatically perform in a way that allows me to produce this sound. After many years of musical practice, the relationships between different sounds and the physical movements required to produce these sounds have become automatised to some extent. For example, if I want to play louder, my body automatically knows what it needs to do. However, I need to allow these automatised processes to happen and to listen to the totality of my performance so that I can add that little bit extra. To do that I need to be in the “right mode”.

We tried different approaches to get me in the right mode. One useful exercise was to imagine that I was sitting a few metres away listening to myself perform. We also worked on completely removing my focus, and exercises such as counting backwards in a language I don't know – whilst playing – had an astonishing effect. I think this confirms that much of what you practise becomes automatised and does not require conscious mental command or control. On the contrary, mental control can get in the way!

After about a month and a half we started working more on repertoire, and in the second movement of Mozart's G major concerto we combined much of what we had been working on. Playing alongside Morten, I set out to listen more to what he was doing than to myself and I tried not to get too involved except for listening. When after a while I succeeded, I realised that it just felt too passive. However, Morten put his viola down, looked me solemnly in the eye and said with conviction: “This is seriously good!”

It became clear to Morten and me that my perception of my own playing was flawed – and closely linked to the physical aspects of my playing. I had become accustomed to using a lot of muscles, and when I adopted a more relaxed playing style it actually felt as if my playing sounded a bit “sloppy”. When I managed to distance myself a bit I would often feel that there was no passion and that my playing was less musical and emotional, when in fact the opposite might have been true.

Even after the first few months, I felt as if I had improved in leaps and bounds. I was able to perform with a much greater sense of calm, both physically and mentally, and I had acquired useful tools for developing a healthy pattern of movement. The idea of bigger gestures over rigorous individual movements was applied to tasks that are more dexterous and to more specific technical challenges. One example is vibrato, where I once again had to allow myself to perform a relaxed movement and not force it.

I feel that the mental and the physical as well as the musical and the technical are all affected by the same issues. Technically speaking, I needed to allow movements to happen rather than control everything in great detail, and you could probably say the same about the musical element. Timani addresses some of the same issues. Everything you work on physically makes for natural and effortless music making, and my impression is that you are seeking a “mode” that allows you to observe yourself from the outside to a greater extent. The process of finding a good mode affected all aspects of my playing. This was useful even when I was only focusing on technique.

Finding the right balance in all this was challenging – and different for each piece. How active or passive should I be? Should I focus on what I’m playing right now, on what’s coming up, or on the longer musical lines? How much do I listen to myself in the bigger picture? How do I relate to my own playing and that of others? These are probably familiar problems for many, but the way in which my approach to them directly affected my pattern of movement, and how they were linked to all the problems I’ve been working on this year, was a new and important discovery. My journey to explore all of this has only just begun.

## **2.2. The teacher’s story**

Sander has explained the process in great detail above. As a teacher, the main thing for me is to reflect on what he is saying. Sander had of course acquired great skill on the violin with the help of my colleagues at the Academy by the time we started working together. The problem was that he was unable to apply this skill properly. You could compare it to a gymnast trying to perform a floor exercise on ice. Every detail was laboured, with the result that the flow of movement was interrupted. We needed to find firm ground to stand on and then piece his violin playing back together again, first in terms of basics such as balance and breathing and then

regaining the fluency of arm movements. Lastly, we tried to loosen up his hands and fingers – when practising vibrato, for example.

I have helped several students go through such an unlearning and relearning process, and I know it is challenging for those involved. Suddenly Sander suffered a relapse, almost taking him back to where he had started. Paganini was replaced by basic movement, breathing and co-ordination exercises. Crucial to a process like this is that it must be built on *co-operation* between student and teacher. While Sander describes how he had to work hard to find the necessary motivation, I am also impressed by the way in which he adopted the principles of the methodology and continued to perfect them. He posed constructive questions and made reflections that helped me develop new exercises and ways of addressing his violin technique. In other words, by putting me on the spot he helped me teach him better.

This might be a good time to say something about practice, which I consider to be a form of exploration. By taking this approach, even simple exercises can result in new ways of perceiving yourself, your movements and sound. Sander and I found new sound characteristics to listen out for – such as overtones, resonance and reverberation – while we gave nuances to others. This way we turned practice into exploration – of music, instrument and self, and of our own attitudes and reactions. One way of commencing this process was to ask Sander to learn Fritz Kreisler's playful Rondino on a Theme by Beethoven by heart before the first class lesson – but without practising it on the violin! This meant that he had to practise mentally, alternatively practise the left and right hand separately, but without playing any part of the piece before presenting it. He succeeded, but it still took time to get completely rid of Sander's habit of thinking of practice as a rigorous safety and control process. We discussed what the content and objective of practising should be, whereby I would define the objective as the coming together of thoughts, emotions and movement – including breathing. I have written in more detail elsewhere about practice as a phenomenon<sup>1</sup>.

Against this backdrop, it might be interesting to look at the concept of musical gestures. It is easy to see control as something that must be applied to every detail of the performance. These details quickly add up; one well-known violin teacher insists on dividing a single bow stroke into five separate components. This kind of

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1 Carlsen, M. (2015). Practice as Self-Exploration. In F. Pio & Ø. Varkøy (Eds.), *Music Education Challenged – Heideggerian Inspirations. Music, Education and Personal Development*. Dordrecht: Springer

reasoning *may* give the brain an overwhelming amount of individual elements to deal with. We are now getting close to how Sander describes his own playing. As an antidote, I am seeking to convey a notion and perception of the *gesture* as the basic element of the playing technique. For example, a single impulsive thought enables us to walk through the room and open the door when someone knocks – we do not have to think about each step or about lifting the arm and turning the door handle as individual actions. In the same way, a series of bow strokes could, in combination with the associated lift and fall of the fingers, be made to feel like one gesture, triggered by a single impulse. Of course, you must first have learnt to operate a door handle and, respectively, to perform up and down bows and left-hand fingering. By connecting individual elements in this way, we can achieve the feeling of control as something that applies to *patterns* of movement, and which can easily be associated with musical phrases. Therein lies some of the above-mentioned amalgamation of thoughts, emotions and movement while performing.

The more confident Sander became about his basic technique, the more he was able to apply his virtuosic skills without falling back into his old habits, which also included some occasionally funny twists and grimaces. However, we still had to be on the alert when five months later we started working on Brahms' violin concerto, which was Sander's big ambition. Even with his reflective approach to playing, a certain amount of raw power could easily create obstacles when facing the huge musical and technical challenges that this work poses. As far as possible, we sought to resolve the technical challenges by means of musical concepts. This means that the concept had to be as clear as it could be before being converted into associated gestures. The thing is, the more meaningful the phrase, the easier it is to execute. This takes time, but just the fact that he now feels comfortable studying one of the greatest works in the violin repertoire tells me that he has succeeded in this challenging process. I should like to congratulate both him and myself!





# 3 Posture awareness, physical exercise and recuperation as elements of music practice

*Harald Jørgensen<sup>1</sup>*

## 3.1. The project

There is hardly a higher music education institution today that does not offer its performing students an introduction to how to use the body correctly.

The Norwegian Academy of Music (NMH) offers modules in several disciplines involving body control and correct use of the body. They include Feldenkrais, tai chi, qigong, eurhythmics, biomechanics (Timani) (all covered by the umbrella subject “Body, Balance and Breathing”), occupational physiology and Alexander Technique (see Chapter 4). The project described here is based on naprapathy, which has not previously been used at the NMH.

Four violin students and their teacher participated. The violin is in many ways an ideal instrument for a project like this. All instruments have their physical challenges, but it is not without reason that one English performance scientist describes the violin (along with the viola and flute) as being “notoriously user-unfriendly”. Research has found that the biggest physical problems suffered by violinists relate to the neck and shoulders as well as forearms, hands and wrists. They also share some problems with all musicians: bad posture, inappropriate practice regimes, poor fitness levels and stress.<sup>2</sup>

The project has involved three seminars at the NMH with the principal instrument teacher, students and naprapath as well as one seminar at New York University for teachers and students from Norway, Australia and the US.

In light of the above, the aim of the seminars was to improve the students’ stamina and quality of practice through effective recuperation and injury prevention, by:

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1 The violin teacher on this project was Professor Peter Herresthal, while naprapath Morten Skjønnhaug provided tuition in exercise and recuperation. This article has been produced on the basis of reports from Morten Skjønnhaug, Peter Herresthal and the students.  
2 References to research literature are provided at the end of the article.

- Acquiring basic knowledge about body functions
- Learning how problems can be mitigated
- Learning to prevent new problems through recuperation, physical activity and exercises

This involved demonstrating and practising:

- Posture techniques: Demonstrating which extreme muscle and joint positions create tension/strain; moving with the music to create better circulation; set-up of chin/shoulder rests; looking at tendencies and faults in individual performers; and how to break with negative patterns.
- Training and stretching: Research shows that string players often practise a lot, and they need good routines for recuperating after practice. This involved exercises with rubber resistance bands to improve strength and blood circulation in regions impacted by static muscle use as well as light stretching of muscles that tend to shorten when exposed to repetitive strain.
- Good routines for taking breaks during practice: Examples were provided of what constitutes a healthy balance between practice and rest. Rest patterns were suggested that are easy to incorporate but that are easily forgotten during an intensive day of practice. The importance of taking several short breaks was emphasised – including breaks as short as one minute in order to boost stamina and concentration.

All seminars began with a brief, individual consultation and treatment in order to identify knots and blocks in the muscles of each student, before using this information as a basis for individual guidance during the seminars on the topics described above.

Having the principal instrument teacher present also benefited the teacher, as it provided him with knowledge of strain problems and potential injury that can be prevented by teaching correct performance techniques.

### **3.2. Naprapathy**

Naprapathy is a manual therapy that aims to alleviate problems in the musculo-skeletal system. It is closely related to manual physiotherapy, osteopathy and chiropractic.

Naprapathy originated in the US and has its roots in chiropractic therapy. Naprapaths focus on the entire skeleton, including joints, muscles and ligaments. Naprapathy is used to prevent and treat ailments in the musculoskeletal system. Naprapaths combine orthopaedic manual therapy with specific knowledge about the body's muscles, skeleton, joints and nervous system.

This form of therapy is sometimes used in sports medicine and occupational health. The treatment varies depending on the nature and location of the pain, and it may include massage, stretching, manipulation of joints and applying pressure to "trigger points" (hypersensitive muscle spots). The patient is given advice on exercises and stretching. A course of treatment usually involves three to six sessions, fewer in the case of acute injuries. Side effects are thought to be similar to those of chiropractic, but less severe. There is limited documentation of the effects and side effects of naprapathy, and there is no research on the subject.

It takes four years to train as a naprapath, and study programmes are offered in Sweden, Finland and the US. In Sweden and Finland naprapaths must complete a fifth practice year to receive their authorisation and become part of the national health service. In Norway naprapathy is considered an alternative therapy.<sup>3</sup>

### 3.3. Participants and hours

The project started in autumn 2014 with two preparatory seminars for four first-year students. The naprapath went through the main themes that would be covered in subsequent seminars: posture in different practice situations, a training programme especially aimed at violinists, and advice on recuperation techniques. At the start of 2015 the naprapath, violin teacher and three students travelled to the US to participate in the NYU Winter String Camp, an annual seminar held by the string department at the Steinhardt School, a part of New York University. The seminar was attended by students, violin and viola teachers from Australia and the US along with specialists on posture, recuperation and Alexander Technique.

The "naprapathy group" contributed by having Peter Herresthal use his master-classes to prepare the students for the naprapathy seminar later in the week, emphasising the importance of good posture and recuperation to effective practice. Naprapath Morten Skjønnhaug held two all-day seminars where the students

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3 More information about naprapathy is provided in the reference list at the end of the article.

performed and Peter Herresthal served as a technical/musical “translator”. The seminars were attended by a large audience, which included some of America’s leading teachers. Two of the students from the NMH took part and helped with the demonstrations. The topics covered are described in Section 3.1. Aside from the seminars, the group also explored and were given demonstrations of other physical techniques and topics, such as Alexander Technique, the set-up and design of violin chinrests, and information about the institution’s programme for “Undoing Bad Habits”.

The subsequent seminars at the NMH continued to address the main themes described in Section 3.1, including training suggestions and exercises (also provided via video) and with an increasingly nuanced approach to patterns of movement based on new experience and knowledge. This knowledge was applied by the principal instrument teachers in their weekly lessons while working on technique, vibrato, bow arm, shoulders, neck and use of the legs and back while performing. All students were given a one-to-one therapy session on Morten Skjønnhaug’s table.

### **3.4. The students’ assessments**

The four participating first-year students were not selected because they had displayed physiological problems. However, it eventually transpired that they had started their studies suffering physiological complaints of one kind or another: stiff neck, shoulder pain and tense muscles. These were complaints that they had experienced but not really sought help for. Only one of the students had seen a naprapath before the project started.

The students describe how the one-to-one sessions with the naprapath may have involved therapy in the form of massage, but the guidance was always based on the students’ posture and movements while practising and playing. The students recount how “we regularly looked at how we hold the instrument and how we stand”, how during the course of the seminar they “got feedback on our playing and good suggestions as to how to prevent muscle tension”, and how the naprapath was able to “see that there was something wrong with my body as I was putting excessive strain on the shoulder and upper arm while playing, and told me where this excessive strain came from”.

The training and resistance band exercises they were given to build strength in the neck, back and arms were well received and described as “really useful”. The students have indicated that they use the bands regularly. One of the students writes that “the exercises we were introduced to were really useful, and I use them several times a week after I’ve played a lot and want to reset my muscles!”. Another student highlights the importance of the exercises in boosting blood circulation, especially in the muscle groups he had been struggling with.

One student concluded that “I certainly don’t think I would’ve all but got rid of my neck problems had I not been advised and made aware of what I’m doing wrong in terms of strain”. Awareness was very much a recurring theme when the students assessed the outcomes of the project: “I’ve become so much more aware of my physical <bad habits> while playing (not just the ones Morten told me about there and then, but I am generally more aware of them myself when I’m practising), and I know what I need to do to avoid them,” writes another student. A third student claims that the insight he has gained “has meant that I can now work with more purpose to eliminate the risk of the same problems reoccurring,” while the fourth mentions “lots of good tips about physicality in relation to playing”, and that “the exercises he showed us were very good, they work well as warm-ups and mini-workouts”.

On that basis it is reasonable to conclude that these students have acquired skills in respect of the three objectives set out in Section 3.1.

### **3.5. The violin teacher’s assessment of the project**

The teacher emphasises the difference between seminars taking a “quick fix” approach to posture and movement, such as the US seminar, and “working closely with four young musicians” over time, since the latter generates “lasting results which can be followed up on during day-to-day lessons in a completely different way”. He describes the students as “open and curious” and says they have “taken on board the information as a natural part of the many routines you need to learn as a new music student”. He also insists that “all of them have seen clear improvements in terms of muscle tensions and blocks, and they all practise significantly more every day with less wear and tear”.

### 3.6. Conclusion

Just like the Alexander Technique project (see Chapter 4), there were two imperatives associated with this project:

- That the naprapathy sessions were closely linked to how the students use their bodies when practising their instrument
- That the principal instrument teacher attended the seminars and transferred knowledge to the instrumental lessons

This would ensure optimal contact and knowledge transfer between teachers and students in order to maximise comprehension and guidance. This appears to have worked well.

Knowledge of the physical themes being addressed was clearly something new to most of the students. This is an important observation that highlights how the project has broached an issue that many new students may be unfamiliar with when starting their studies. It is also quite possible that some teachers may wish to expand their existing knowledge of these issues. These are challenges that music education institutions must address.

### Relevant reading

Research on physiological problems in musicians:

Aaron Williamon (Ed.), *Musical Excellence. Strategies and Techniques to Enhance Performance*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004. The chapters 'Managing the physical demands of musical performance', pp. 41–60, and 'Physical fitness', pp. 163–178.

Information about naprapathy:

The national information centre for alternative medicine: [www.nifab.no](http://www.nifab.no)

Norges Naprapatforbund: [www.naprapat.org](http://www.naprapat.org)

## 4 Practice and Alexander Technique

Harald Jørgensen<sup>1</sup>

### 4.1. The project

Alexander Technique (AT) is taught at many conservatoires and music colleges, including the Norwegian Academy of Music (NMH). It is offered at the NMH as an elective subject between October and February, involving five group sessions each lasting one hour as well as seven 30-minute individual sessions for each student.

AT provision can be organised in a number of ways. As far as music academies are concerned, it would be pertinent to ask whether the benefits of teaching AT to students would increase if it is somehow linked to teaching on their principal instruments. In autumn 2014 plans got underway for a project involving teaching AT to a select number of students and their teachers. The aim of the course was to establish a collaboration between the AT teacher, the students and their principal instrument teachers. The idea was that such teamwork would enhance the transfer of learning between AT teaching, instrumental lessons and individual practice. The project ran from early January to mid-May 2015.

### 4.2. What is Alexander Technique?

AT is a method for changing bad habits in mind and movement in order to prevent tensions that restrict functionality. AT aims to equip us with methods for replacing automatised physical habits that affect the flow, quality and expression of our playing with conscious, controlled behaviours. These habits range from the way we stand or sit to how we hold the instrument and control our breathing.

Awareness is a key concept of AT, and two of its main principles are *inhibition* and *direction*. “Inhibition” means preventing undesirable behaviour from manifesting

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1 The project was conducted by Alexander Technique teacher Stephen Parker in collaboration with Professor Isabelle Perrin, Professor Julius Pranevičius and Senior Lecturer Matz Pettersen. Project manager was Harald Jørgensen, who also authored the report.

itself, e.g. a horn player tensing her throat muscles in a way that restricts the sound quality, or a harpist tensing his neck and shoulder muscles, thus stopping himself from making full use of the body and causing injury to himself. The first step is to stop the habit from being set in motion in the first place before replacing it with functional thinking and movement. “Direction” concerns how we approach the stretching and contraction of the body, how we think “upwards”, “downwards” and “outwards” as well as “extension” and “compression” and how to achieve stability and mobility. With these thought patterns in mind, the aim is to achieve an economical use of energy and balanced distribution of tensions in the body.

### **4.3. The objectives of the course**

For the students the aim of the course is to help them take control of their practice and music making in order to improve the quality of their playing. They will do this by:

- Adopting the thinking and main principles behind AT,
- Being able to identify habits that impede the co-ordination of awareness and body while practising and playing (bad habits),
- Being able to limit or eliminate the effects of bad habits while practising and playing by applying solutions based on AT.

For the institution the goal is to try out a model for AT teaching based on collaboration between the AT teacher, student and principal instrument teacher in an attempt to maximise the benefit to the student.

### **4.4. Participants and hours**

Nine students participated in the trial: four harpists, one horn player, one viola player, one pianist, one violinist and one oboe player. The viola, violin and piano students attended a two-hour large group session with the AT teacher involving all the students (not all of them turned up), and they received between 11 and 15 45-minute sessions of one-to-one tuition in AT. The others (one horn player, one oboe player and four harpists) participated in a large group session, received



between 6 and 15 hours of one-to-one tuition in AT and attended AT instruction in class lessons as well. These lessons were timetabled and at the principal instrument teacher's disposal. All or most of the students as well as the principal instrument teacher were present in these class lessons. In addition, a small number of horn and oboe students attended AT classes or small groups with their principal instrumental teacher present without receiving one-to-one AT lessons. The first group of nine make up the "trial group", and it is they who have provided assessments of their experiences during the project.

The students were selected by the principal instrument teachers. There were no particular criteria for the selection. Two of the participants had some previous experience of AT as an elective subject at the NMH.

Three of the teachers also received AT lessons: horn, oboe and violin. They did so in order to gain some first-hand experience and to get a better insight into how the students can adopt AT practices.

The project began in January with teaching AT in a large group, followed by another seminar in February. General information about AT was provided, and the students demonstrated how they behave while playing and practising. The AT teacher offered guidance and drew the participants' attention to their mannerisms and bad habits. One objective was to acquire an understanding of the principles behind this approach and to improve the students' observation skills while also introducing a vocabulary for use in the one-to-one sessions. Basic information about anatomy was also provided. It was difficult to gather all the students due to timetable complications. After two seminars the project manager and AT teacher therefore concluded that the available time would be better spent on additional classes and small groups with AT teacher and principal instrument teacher present.

The one horn student receiving one-to-one lessons also participated in six classes and 10 small group sessions with the other horn students. During these sessions the students worked on topics raised by the AT teacher, e.g.: "How can non-constructive habits have an impact on factors such as breathing, support and the role of the back when preparing to play?" There were also questions posed by the students, such as "How do I make sure I have enough breath for long phrases?" The AT teacher would then link this to the students' playing. The teaching emphasised student involvement through observation and interaction and focused on evaluating the effects of the measures on breathing, sound quality, embouchure etc. Half-way through the semester these sessions were supplemented with teaching in small groups, where

2–4 students would play excerpts from their regular “homework” and their fellow students provide feedback. The students also got involved in observing each other’s behaviours and habits, and relevant issues were raised on the spot. One recurring question was whether there was any change in the students’ playing.

The seven harp classes were initially conducted as thematic lessons, just like the horn classes. The harp students received a practical introduction to the importance and functions of the main joints during practice and performance. Again, changes were made half-way through the project, whereby a small group of students performed their “homework” and received feedback from their peers and AT teacher. One topic was the significance of the back on freedom of movement in the wrist and fingers, which in turn affects sound production. The students also worked without their instruments, for example by standing with their backs against the wall in order to increase awareness of their surroundings and become more conscious of direction (“upwards”, “downwards”, etc.) and concentration.

During three oboe classes, the students worked on issues such as breathing and articulation, especially during staccato play. The participants performed and observed each other to establish which factors affect the mouth and jaw, for example (useful and needless tensions in the neck and back), and what may be conducive to a freer jaw movement. The principal instrument teacher was an integral participant in the group.

All the groups received some form of interactive guidance from the AT teacher, where verbal information was complemented by hands-on experience. AT is not a form of treatment or therapeutic manipulation; rather it involves gentle touching to draw the person’s attention to important parts of the body.

The one-to-one AT lessons were always based on something the students had been working on during practice or issues they had discussed with their principal instrument teacher. The AT teacher would choose a topic if the students had no suggestions. For example “How do you get ready to play?” with the accompanying question: “Is there anything that prevents you from doing what you want to do?” During the classes, the students would first perform, and then the class would pick up on issues that emerged along the way. Extemporaneous issues dominated these classes, in the contextual setting with fellow students and a teacher. Their shared experiences determined the content of the classes.

Both individually and in the groups, the emphasis was on identifying unconstructive habits, labelling them, and applying AT principles in order to change them.

As mentioned previously, the one-to-one lessons for the principal instrument teachers were intended to give them practical experience of the principles of AT and prepare them for understanding the processes that their students would be going through. They therefore performed and received guidance in the same way as the students. Occasionally the first few minutes would be spent commenting on a student's circumstances and development, but primarily these were "the teachers' lessons". When they needed to exchange views on a student, they did so via email or during brief meetings.

## **4.5. Documenting the process and outcomes**

The AT teacher and project manager kept in regular contact. The AT teacher submitted monthly reports on his activities, and there was communication in the form of meetings and email. Any need for adjustments was discussed, and the AT teacher's ongoing experiences with the project were presented. The AT teacher was interviewed at the end of the project and has provided additional written comments.

The students were encouraged to provide written feedback to the AT teacher after each one-to-one lesson, based on a set of questions. This did not work well; only three reports were submitted from the one-to-one lessons. Eight of the nine students provided a written final evaluation.

The three most involved teachers (harp, horn, and oboe) have also submitted written assessments.

## **4.6. The students' assessments**

The idea behind AT

The students have provided comments which show that they have grasped the idea behind AT, using phrases such as "observing my habits", "changing habits", "become more sensitive and correct in our perception of the body, and better co-ordinate and distribute the necessary muscle tension", "more consciously correct body balance, position and movement", and other characteristics of AT. They note that

this takes time to get used to, making comments such as “my understanding of AT has increased, but it is still difficult to achieve the correct state of consciousness on my own”, and “when I was learning the process, the first thing to do was accept that I had adopted bad physical habits. Becoming aware of and identifying these habits takes time”. The need for guidance from the AT teacher is clear to see.

### Identifying mannerisms and bad habits

When attempting to identify mannerisms and bad habits, the students point at how some of their habits had been hidden and were therefore difficult to do something about. One student writes that “taking part in the AT lessons allowed me to observe my habits which, before these lessons, seemed to be a part of me that could never change.” Another student writes that “sometimes I think that I’m able to deal with these habits while playing and sometimes not, but I feel I have improved a lot since we started. At the beginning I wasn’t aware that my habits were as ingrained as they were”.

In terms of signals from the body, potential problem areas for most musicians include the head, neck and back. Depending on the instrument, some may also suffer problems with their hands and arms, wrists and fingers, and other parts of the body. One of these students wrote: “As a harpist I have a tendency to contract my neck and create tension in my shoulders and back.” Another says that “my back is fine, but my chest and arms are tense. This obstructs my breathing and my contact with the instrument while playing”. Tension and breathing were issues that affected all the instruments involved and were raised during practically every class and one-to-one lesson.

Tension was described in a number of different ways. One writes that “I have gained a better understanding of my own instrument. Now I’m able to locate possible causes of any technical difficulties that I encounter and damaging habits that can cause strain or injury if they are not addressed”. Another states that “in the end I feel calmer because I have begun to learn how to stop when I perform movements which turned into habits that created tensions everywhere”.

A couple of students also mentioned how important it is to acquire some knowledge of anatomy and body functions in order to understand how various physical factors trigger movement. One student wrote: “After starting AT I feel that I know my body much better, and I know how to conduct myself in a more natural and appropriate way both during practice and in life in general.” The relationship between body and awareness was also commented upon, for instance by the student experiencing

tension in the chest and arms: “Sometimes the problem is not a technical one to do with your instrument, nor musicality or articulation, but the tensions inside you. This is a major problem, but with AT it is possible to change or control it.”

### Seeking solutions based on AT

When trying to find AT-based solutions the students broached the subject of how to adopt the notion of “direction” and using the terms “upwards”, “downwards” and “outwards” along with “extension” and “compression” in order to explore issues such as “balance between stability and mobility”. The student experiencing tension in the shoulders and neck because she was contracting her neck now feels that her “posture is much better now that I’m thinking <upwards> towards the sky and <downwards> towards my feet”. The concept of direction appears to have become embedded as a practical, useful device. It is mentioned by many of the students, including this one: “Understanding that you only have to think about a specific body part and steer it in a particular direction is a revelation, even though it may sound simple. For example, the ability to focus your attention on the shoulder and then expand the openness in that area without physical effort and reduce the level of tension in the body.”

### Does it affect the quality of playing?

As mentioned above, the objective is for the students to take control of their practice and music making in order to improve the quality of their playing. One student writes that “I’m very aware that my habits affect my playing in various ways”. This acknowledgement seems to be shared by all the students. The impression of improved quality in their music making is also evident in these statements: “My sound has changed completely after the AT tuition because my body is relaxed and my breathing deeper. I feel that I can create the sound I want without too much effort”, and “a better understanding of AT has improved my understanding of my instrument because I started to become more particular about the sound I was making, the musical lines that make the music breathe, etc.”. Tension and stress and the effects of tension on the students’ playing were commented on by most of them. Here is one example: “After the lesson before the weekend I felt a growing awareness of my habits along with a heightened presence. Afterwards we had a class that I hadn’t really properly prepared for, but instead of getting stressed I took a relaxed approach, and the response was that they had never heard me play that well before.”

## Conclusion on the students' accomplishments

The students unanimously describe a process in which all the four student objectives have been acknowledged and are being addressed; to adopt the thinking and main principles behind AT to allow them to identify habits that impede the co-ordination of awareness and body while practising and playing, and to limit or eliminate the effects of bad habits while practising and playing by applying solutions based on AT. All with one main goal: to influence their practice with a view to improving the quality of their playing.

At the same time, the students' statements contain an acknowledgement that using AT is a process whereby you cannot easily "resolve" a problem or fully master a certain way of thinking; rather it is an ongoing process.

## 4.7. Teaching AT individually and in groups

As mentioned previously, one key objective of the project was to trial an AT programme that involved interaction between the AT teacher, students and principal instrument teacher. The idea is that such communication can maximise the benefits to the students.

The six students who received both one-to-one lessons and AT classes were asked to compare the one-to-one sessions with the classes where both the AT teacher and their instrumental teacher were present and then evaluate their strengths and any weaknesses, similarities and differences, and the balance between them. Only three students responded to this request, but they were fully in agreement:

It was important to have both one-to-one lessons where they could apply AT to their own habits as well as group sessions with their peers where both the AT teacher and their instrumental teacher were present. They argued that it was the one-to-one lessons that provided the greatest insight into their own practice and playing habits. But at the same time it was useful to be present during the classes where their fellow students performed and were given guidance, as this harp student writes: "Most of the time it was a real eye-opener to see the changes in the body [of a fellow student] before and after applying AT. Most of all, it was a shock to hear the changes in the sound." The learning aspect was clearly present: "During the classes it was really interesting to learn to understand and compare all the different habits of your fellow

students, because this better enables you to know what to do while you play and to try to change things that aren't good for your body." The balance between one-to-one lessons and classes was deemed to be good.

The students also commented on the instrumental teacher's role during the classes. They describe the teachers as being active by asking questions and (to some extent) participating in the same way as the students. One of the students also describes how the two teachers together made her understand something she had failed to grasp during the one-to-one AT lessons.

Having the teachers observe the students while they receive AT-based guidance also enables the students' mental and physical habits to be addressed during the one-to-one instrumental lessons. Only one of the students mentioned this: "We have occasionally discussed issues raised during AT lessons in my one-to-one instrumental lessons. That was good, because I'd got one of the principles slightly wrong, and my instrumental teacher was able to spot it."

One of the wind students also describes how a teacher, who also received one-to-one AT tuition, joined in one of the student's one-to-one AT sessions: "... and that was a breakthrough. That was when I really started to apply the ideas of rotation and mobility in my playing in earnest. It is the one thing that has helped me the most. The AT teacher had the ideas, and my instrumental teacher repackaged them slightly with more practical instructions: rotate your torso back and forth a bit while you play."

These statements suggest that the combination of teaching AT in both one-to-one and class settings where the AT teacher and instrumental teacher were present had a good effect on learning.

## **4.8. The teachers and their evaluations of the project**

The instrumental teachers conducted the project with different levels of involvement in the AT lessons and tuition:

- Two received individual AT lessons and were present in their role as principal instrument teachers in the classes and small groups where the AT teacher was also present. Both had one student receiving one-to-one AT lessons.

- One did not receive individual AT tuition but was present during the classes where the AT teacher was also present. This teacher had four students receiving one-to-one AT lessons.
- One received individual AT tuition but did not attend the classes with the AT teacher present. He had one student receiving one-to-one AT lessons.
- Two did not receive individual AT tuition and did not attend AT classes. Both had one student receiving one-to-one AT lessons.

The last three were so little involved in the AT project that they are not part of the evaluation. The evaluation was therefore carried out by three of the teachers.

The teachers describe the students as being interested and proactive during the AT classes, how they have “involved themselves a great deal in the process through asking lots of questions and undertaking extensive individual practice”, and how the students were “good at providing feedback on how things were going both verbally and in writing”. They also describe students who have become “much more aware of the importance of performing with the whole body, not just the fingers. Understanding the body and how to play better by making a few physical changes has become a big issue and a major revelation”, and how they have “gained plenty of new experiences that have helped them reflect on what they are doing. For some of the students their goals have become clearer, some became more conscious of their bodies and different relationships that affect their playing. Generally speaking they have become better at articulating things, especially thanks to the group lessons”.

The same teacher also asserted that “all this has affected the students’ practice, but in a slightly indirect way. It has provided a framework for the students within which constructive practice can take place, where they themselves can ask questions about how to accomplish things and begin an exploratory journey into the world of music”. Such changes were noted by all three teachers with students receiving both one-to-one lessons and classes with the AT teacher present.

Were the students’ experiences from the individual AT sessions raised during the one-to-one principal instrument lessons? One of the teachers only had one student receiving individual AT tuition, and “during the one-to-one [instrumental] lessons I would ask her how she found the lessons. The response was positive. I didn’t go into detail since I felt that her problems were linked to her personality”. Another of the three raised an aspect of the posture of one of the students “because I felt there was something she hadn’t quite grasped [during the AT lessons]. The matter was



later discussed with the AT teacher”. The instrumental teacher’s own understanding of AT can of course be put to use in this way. The third teacher says that “it was very important that I had some knowledge of AT”. He had received several lessons with the AT tutor, and during the instrumental lessons both he and his students raised issues from the AT lessons. The teacher then tried to follow up on how the students incorporated their AT-based knowledge and to further relate it to their instrument. “If I had any questions, I asked the students to bring it up during the individual AT lessons or classes. This worked well, and I also think it was useful for the students since we worked together on asking and answering questions.”

The other two teachers also describe how their knowledge of AT has had an effect on their own teaching. This could involve identifying misunderstandings on the part of the students and increased confidence in teaching breathing, articulation and other techniques. More fundamentally, their comments relate to how they had gained a new perspective on how the body works and how important it is to music making. One of them also mentions the time aspect: “What also became clear was that this kind of work takes time and is not a quick fix. Although I had a general idea, it took several months before I really <got> those principles of the body – and I’m not even certain that I have gained a full understanding of them. There were a few things that I thought I’d worked out a month ago but then realised that I had actually misunderstood them after several one-to-one lessons and individual practice, both with and without my instrument.”

## 4.9. Conclusion

As mentioned, the students state that they have acknowledged and are working on all four student objectives, with beneficial effects. At the same time they admit that applying AT is a process in which it takes time to master a problem or way of thinking.

Can we be certain that AT has the effect we are looking for? There is some research into AT which with a reasonable degree of certainty has proved how AT can influence breathing, posture and use of the body, for example. This project has also sought to help find answers in that it was a relatively systematic process limited to only a few students and teachers. The positive experiences cited by both teachers and students tell us that these participants at least have seen the usefulness of AT tuition and teaching. There is also a possibility that their reactions are

a consequence of the participating teachers' being open, receptive and positive, and that other sceptical and perhaps reluctant participants would have arrived at a different result. It is difficult to infer any conclusions from this, since even sceptical participants could conceivably change their minds. Some of the students also started off being sceptical but ended up feeling positive.

One important outcome of the project, however, is that exploiting the potential of AT requires:

- The students to be given an adequate number of one-to-one lessons over time with guidance in the use of their bodies based on AT.
- The teachers to also receive tuition in body use based on AT.
- Individual AT lessons being supplemented with classes where all (or some) of the teacher's students are present along with the AT teacher in order to give the students a broader experience of AT by observing their peers perform and work on mannerisms and bad habits under the guidance of AT principles.

## Relevant reading

Elizabeth Valentine: Alexander Technique. In: A. Williamon (Ed.), *Musical Excellence*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004, pp. 179–195.

## 5 Practising with a plan

*Matz Pettersen and Harald Jørgensen*<sup>1</sup>

### 5.1. Creating a preparation chart for a practice period

#### The project

Every practice session involves elements of planning, such as what to practise and in which order to handle the tasks at hand. Phase 1 of the project “From Idea to Concert” ran for two months in the autumn of 2014. Three bachelor students guided by their oboe teacher Matz Pettersen set out to rehearse a piece in preparation for a class concert at the end of the semester. The key question was: can a 6–7 week practice plan help the students make better use of their practice time?

Learning repertoire ahead of a concert is something all conservatoire students have been doing for years. However, none of these three students had tried creating a schedule for a 6–7 week preparation period.

The works they would concentrate on were selected in consultation with their teacher. Student 1 chose Kalliwoda’s Concertino, Student 2 the first movement of a concerto by Albinoni, while Student 3 opted for Hummel’s Introduction, Theme and Variations. Students 1 and 2 are in their second year of the bachelor programme, while Student 3 is in the first year.

The project started with the student and teacher devising a preparation chart where they drew up interim goals for the weeks leading up to the concert. They spent the first couple of weeks adding important milestones to the chart, such as when they planned to have completed rehearsing the first movement, the second movement etc. They identified challenges in the work, e.g. how some sections contained technical passages that required more time in the timetable. Other passages may involve particular challenges in terms of stamina, intonation, dynamics and form. They focused on how certain challenges required measured and prolonged practice, while others could be linked to specific basic exercises to aid breathing or intonation, for instance. They generally worked on the premise that

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1 Senior Lecturer Matz Pettersen conducted the project, while Harald Jørgensen produced the report based on information from Pettersen and the students.

they should have finished studying every movement of the work thoroughly two weeks before the concert. The remaining two weeks they would try to address any parts of the work that they felt required more practice, while any technical aspects that they had mastered at an early stage were put to one side and revisited later on. Eventually they would also decide on when they wanted an accompanist, when to hold the dress rehearsal and similar issues.

In addition to the preparation chart, the students were also asked to keep a record of what they did and what they needed to work on next. These notes were not shown to or used by the teacher. Notes from a day with three hour-long practice sessions by Student 2: “Plan: warm-up, focus: legato/air flow; Albinoni, Britten, Tchaikovsky. Completed: Session 1: warm-up C major, good airflow. Salviani No. 12, crotchet=88, just managed it, No. 13, crotchet=69, just managed it (stressing over fingering), No. 14, crotchet=66, only just. Session 2: Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 6. Session 3: Albinoni. Around 2 hours of reed making. Really good day of practising!”

Students 1 and 3 worked on their chosen works for the duration of the period, while Student 2 switched pieces. She made the change because she felt she had exhausted the piece half-way through the period and performed it in a forum lesson. For the concert at the end of the semester, she chose a sonatina by Pierre Sancan. She did not create a preparation chart for these 3–4 weeks of practice, but she said she adopted the thinking behind the chart.

With regard to technical challenges, they looked at various practice strategies, and the students shared their experiences during two group lessons.

## Experiences

Student 1 got on well with the task. He revised his preparation chart along the way when he had completed a task earlier or later than expected, and he said that he “became more focused” by using the chart and adhering to it by writing notes. As mentioned above, Student 2 changed her piece half-way through and did not use a formal preparation chart for the second piece, although she did adopt the “method”. Student 3, who had just enrolled on the bachelor course, found it difficult to follow the method. He wanted more short-term goals and did not feel he was “good at evaluating his playing”.

When speaking to the students they reflected on how it can be “difficult to set yourself long-term goals; difficult to predict what is going to happen”, and how “long-term goals take up too much time; it gets boring having to work on the same

thing for a prolonged period". The teacher was of the opinion that the students should choose practice assignments lasting two to three weeks in order to maintain motivation.

During the autumn, the teacher came to take the view that long-term planning must be better tailored to the individual and that students at the start of their bachelor studies "need clearer guidance and follow-up concerning practice. It would be good to start with a defined, shorter practice project for new students in their first semester". The teacher still felt that "the project was useful both for me and for the students. The students' and my reflections throughout the project have given me the clear impression that it is necessary to follow up on the students' practice processes more closely, especially at the beginning of their studies," he says.

The students' comments may indicate that the concepts of "goals", "long-term goals" and "interim goals" must be better defined and that the relationships between these types of goals and the time spent on them must be discussed, and that motivation and stamina can be put to the test when even minor interim goals take longer than expected.

## 5.2. Practising orchestral solos

### The project

Based on the experiences garnered from the first phase of the project, a further two projects were conducted. One involved Student 2 learning the cor anglais solo from Ravel's Piano Concerto in G major, due to be performed in concert with a soloist and orchestra.

The cor anglais is the main doubling instrument for oboe players, and this particular solo section poses numerous challenges. It contains long phrases requiring great stamina, and it is very delicate in terms of intonation. It is also easy to get confused about the rhythms while practising it, since the solo piano provides accompaniment in 6/8 while the cor anglais melody is in 3/4. How should the student plan her practice prior to the concert one month later? The teacher and student collaborated on creating a plan without spelling it out in the form of a preparation chart. The student said she "popped in and checked with my teacher

that I was on schedule”. The teacher says he closely followed up on the student’s progress.

### Experiences

The student felt the planning worked “really well”, and she wants to do the same “on similar projects”. She is referring in particular to learning new repertoire. She did not take notes (on what she was working on and thoughts on further progress) over the course of this process, because the learning took place during a “very intensive period with lots of practice” where she “kept it in all my head and didn’t feel the need to write things down”. The student says she has “always been good at planning, stopping when I should, or making that final push”. She usually keeps a log where she writes down the objective of the practice session, what she has accomplished, and “things I must be aware of, such as concentration”.

The teacher points out that “in this process we gained useful experience of planning individual practice and using practice aids such as a metronome, tuner, literature and recordings”.

## 5.3. Practising études

### The project

Études are a regular feature in most instrumentalists’ development. Are they used correctly? Why do we practise them? Planning étude practice and reflecting on its purpose and execution became a project for Students 1 and 3.

The students were usually given two weekly études as homework – one slow and one fast. The teacher gave them some advice on how to practise them, and why. Subsequently it emerged that the students usually started by playing through the étude and would often get stuck and struggle to move on. The teacher therefore switched the timings around. Instead of “spending 5 minutes of a lesson looking at the étude and then moving on to something else” as they had done in the past, they now spent almost the entire lesson exploring the étude on the occasions one had been assigned. They went through the études to identify any challenges and establish the usefulness of practising them. They tried out different practice techniques for different passages and discussed which benefits could be had from

passages that were not technically challenging. The students had to work out how they wanted to practise and were asked the following week how they got on.

One important objective for the teacher was to make the students take a more conscious approach to the études, to exploit them as the specific exercises they are, e.g. in order to master a scale in a particular key, and not just see the problems in playing them. This also meant accepting that they will not always be able to reach the goals they have set themselves and that their playing is perhaps not as metronomic or fast as it should be, instead thinking of the practice as part of their long-term development.

At the teacher's request, both students made notes on what the learning objective of each étude was, about time use and what they found difficult and had to work more on, and on how they solved problems.

## Experiences

Both students stated that they learnt to approach and take advantage of the études with more focus than before. Where they were previously more concerned about playing through the étude and making as few mistakes as possible, they were now more anxious to understand the objective or meaning of the étude and to work on that. The students said they found going through the étude with the teacher very useful and that it helped them structure their practice better. They found that they mastered difficult sections quicker and picked up on more detail (such as dynamics and phrasing) earlier than before. They also felt that their practising was generally different and better than before with more structure and method.

They have not continued to take notes, but from what they are saying it appears that they have adopted a more planned and systematic approach to both études and repertoire.

One observation made by the teacher about going through the études together was that it was better to "spend more time on that than have to listen to their perhaps not getting it right". It was also important to be as specific as possible when going through the études with the students. "Things often interweave, and sometimes it can be good to restrict your focus to specific aspects of the playing. It could be helpful to be specific about what each student should focus on when practising the étude depending on how advanced the student is. Sound, technique, articulation, intonation, body/breathing etc."

## 5.4. Conclusion

The practice planning project evolved into two phases, where the second phase built on the experiences gained in the first. Emphasis was on learning how to practise in most one-to-one lessons and classes – more so in phase 2 than in phase 1. The teacher felt that the experiment with a long-term plan was successful because it identified a need for individual adaptation and because the process resulted in numerous “offshoots”, such as conversations about mental preparation and correct use of the body. He also had the impression that the students took an interest in the concept of practice to a greater extent than in a normal semester, “they took more individual ownership of the practice process”, and showed “greater awareness of their own practice routines”.

The students were encouraged to take notes while they practised. The role of the notes in the process could be questioned: What should be the purpose of them? What should they contain? When and how should you write things down? Could the notes be given a bigger role, adapted to each student? Should they be incorporated into the one-to-one lessons and used by the teacher when teaching the students how to practise? Do they represent untapped potential? Similar questions were mooted during the project on concentration and awareness, see Chapter 1.

## Relevant reading

Two short texts can be found in Harald Jørgensen: *Undervisning i øving. En innføring for sang- og instrumentallærere*. Norsk Musikforlag a/s, Oslo, 2011.

The chapter ‘Å velge ut og organisere øveaktiviteter’, pp. 33–38, and ‘Å sette seg mål’, pp. 39–42.



## 6 Practising scales in French horn teaching<sup>1</sup>

*Julius Pranevičius*

### 6.1. Introduction

Scales have for a long time been used in instrumental teaching, and it is therefore imperative for me to find a good and effective way of teaching them. I am of the belief that the quality of practice is linked to how much time the students spend on tasks in addition to the practice strategies they already have in their toolbox. I have tried out a system where I sought to gain some insight into the daily practice routines of some of my students by asking them to send me recordings of their scale practice by email. This allowed me to give fairly instantaneous feedback on the quality of their playing. My hope is for the students to feel a greater sense of control during the learning process because they themselves decide when the recordings are good enough to forward to me. Since everything is contained in the audio files, it is easier for me to analyse and reflect on their playing. As a teacher this also gives you insight into things that the students may struggle with during their day-to-day practice.

### 6.2. Background

Before trying out the method, we organised weekly scale classes where all first and second year students would perform. Although these classes were successful to some degree, there were also a few downsides. The biggest obstacle was that if some of the students had failed to prepare properly, we had to spend time learning things the students should have learnt in the practice room. I had hoped that playing in front of a group would motivate the students to play better, but some did not prepare well enough.

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1 A longer article about this project is due to be published in the journal *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*: “Rich feedback and assessment environment in a horn studio: Practicing scales.” The article goes into greater detail about issues such as the theoretical basis for the project and about the scope for involving peers in the evaluation.

My project aims to enable the students to reflect on their own playing. It is therefore important that the learning objectives are as clear as they can be, that the students know what to do to achieve these objectives, and that both their and my evaluations steer them towards achieving the objectives. In order to add more structure to the project, I adopted ideas from Biggs et al. (2011) on “constructive alignment” along with a summary of research into what characterises good feedback practice by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006). They claim that good feedback

- helps clarify what good performance is
- facilitates the development of self-assessment
- delivers information to students about their learning
- encourages teacher and peer dialogue
- encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem
- provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance
- provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching

I have used these principles as a starting point for giving feedback to the students.

### **6.3. The project**

One student participated in the project for four months, while a couple of others were involved for shorter periods. They were asked to record and submit either scales, études or orchestral excerpts. They also had to provide a brief written self-assessment with each recording. I gave them feedback via email, and if the level of their performance was unsatisfactory, the students had to submit a new recording.

The assignments I set them changed over the course of the project in terms of:

- Content. First, they were asked to record études. Later this was extended to include scales and orchestral excerpts.
- How often to submit their assignments. They started by submitting material every week, but this eventually turned into daily submissions.

- Length of the material. We started with entire études and ended up with fractions of a scale in some recordings.
- Self-assessments were introduced along the way.

In order to execute the practice assignment, the students not only had to perform adequately on their instrument, they also had to find strategies for allocating time and energy and for practising effectively. They also needed to have access to recording equipment, knowledge of how this equipment worked, how to submit the assignments etc. Overall, it was quite complex but also informative.

During the project, I could observe the students' habits and struggles as they practised. Early on, it became clear that recording an entire étude was too much to ask. We therefore tried to break them down into smaller sections and thus adapt the content of the assignment. The self-assessments provided interesting information about how the students think and what they focus on while practising.

At times, some of the students were unable to submit recordings at the agreed intervals. This suggested a lack of planning and structure in their practice. This was raised during the one-to-one lessons, which had a positive effect on regular practice.

One aspect where the weekly scale classes failed was that the students were unable to improve on their performances due to time restraints. The advantage of email is that the students can continue to submit recordings until their performance is satisfactory. The fact that they had to submit recordings every day pushed them to practise regularly, and they received quick feedback on their practice. We could say that the students did not just learn to play scales; they also learnt something about what is important when you practise.

Some students felt that the initial feedback made them stressed (statements such as "play without any errors" and similar). We discussed this during the one-to-one lessons and found alternatives that worked better. For my part, it was useful to hear the students' views on how things are articulated. In this dialogue, I became aware that the students often perceive things differently to my intentions. It was good to get all feedback in writing as it allowed me to go through it and see what was not working.

## 6.4. Involving fellow students in the evaluations

If this exercise were to involve more students, it would mean some additional work for the teacher. One extension of the programme could be to get peers to evaluate the recordings and give feedback to each other. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) have also described the benefits of peer learning:

- Students who have just learned something are often better able than teachers to explain it to their classmates
- Additional ideas for how to solve a problem
- The evaluation skills used to assess peers can be transferred to self-assessment
- Increased motivation
- The students may be more prepared to receive critiques from their peers

Obtaining the other students' evaluations by email was not easy, and in the article due for publication in *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, I am describing a system to facilitate this.

I have attempted to find a simple IT tool that can be used to upload recordings to allow the students to comment on each other's playing, but I have found most of them to be difficult to use and therefore not very practical. A system needs to be user-friendly for multiple participants to use it. It should also have three functions: (1) record and upload, (2) organise, (3) allow the students to comment and reflect on their own and each other's playing.

The desire to develop such a system stems from the criticism that the most widely used internet-based learning tools are monolithic and lack flexibility (Wells et al., 2013). My own investigations have confirmed this. There are numerous tools that can be integrated into a new system. For example, there are several smartphone apps that can record sound and upload files, but the challenge is to create a complete solution.

## 6.5. Conclusion

I consider the project to have been a success both in terms of learning outcomes for the students and my own experiences. Despite the fact that only horn players participated, and that they primarily practised scales, I believe that the scheme can

be transferred to other instruments and other content, such as practising orchestral excerpts and similar. I am planning to try out the programme with additional students next year and possibly develop solutions to help with the practical arrangements. I also wish to include young students from the Talent Programme. These students meet each other 12 times a year, and a project such as this one could help create a sense of community. Once the students have submitted enough recordings, the teacher can observe their progress. The recordings become a sort of portfolio that could potentially also be used as part of the final assessment.

## References

- Biggs, J. B., & Tang, C. S. (2011). *Teaching for quality learning at university: what the student does*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill/Society for Research into Higher Education/Open University Press. Available from: <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10510868> (accessed 30 April 2015).
- Nicol, D. J. & Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006). Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: a model and seven principles of good feedback practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(2), 199–218.
- Wells, M., Lefevre, D., & Begklis, F. (2013). Innovation via a Thin LMS: A middleware alternative to the traditional learning management system. Paper presented at the *30th Ascilite Conference*. Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia 1–4 December 2013. Available from: <http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/sydney13/program/papers/Wells.pdf>



## 7 Teaching projects and teacher collaboration

*Harald Jørgensen*

### 7.1. Establishing projects in spring 2014

Teachers for these six projects were recruited in the period March–April 2014. The teachers received an email with information about the project, and I visited two of the instrumental departments to present information about the project. There were a set of requirements:

- The teachers should choose their own topics for the practice project. The themes had to be of general interest and not just relate to a particular instrument.
- The teachers should conduct one or more projects during the year.
- They should report on the progress of the projects.
- They should meet the other teachers to exchange information and discuss the projects and the progress of the teaching of practice routines at the Norwegian Academy of Music (NMH).

Sixteen teachers expressed their interest, and six were selected. They were piano, violin, viola/violin, oboe, harp and French horn teachers respectively. The invitation stressed that projects that addressed topics involving both mind and body were especially welcome, and we managed to achieve a good mix. Two projects involved experts on subjects other than principal instruments. One project involved naprapathy guidance for students (see Chapter 3), and one Alexander Technique (Chapter 4).

I held individual meetings with each of the six teachers, mainly about potential topics. At a joint meeting on 23 May we looked at schedules and meeting plans for the autumn, the possibility of joint seminars with the students, information about the chosen topics, information about the possibility of involving external experts, how the projects should be documented, how to disseminate information to colleagues and others, how the students' participation in the projects should be

voluntary and how they should sign a contract regulating their rights and obligations. The teachers were allocated resources from the research and development programme for their projects. The two “external” teachers (one of them also taught elective subjects at the Academy) were paid separately.

## **7.2. Pedagogical development projects as a method**

Teaching students how to practise within the framework of a project demands more of the teacher and students than does day-to-day teaching. Five factors in particular distinguish the two teaching situations:

1. A project requires a theme, something to be studied over a given period of time. The theme must be described before the project starts in order that the participants have a goal or objective for their work.
2. The progress of the project must be monitored to establish that the activity is beneficial or that it provides valuable experiences of both a positive and negative nature. This means that the teacher (and the participating students, too, for the most part) should take notes during the project.
3. That the participating students sign up for the project and enter into a contract setting where they know their rights and obligations.
4. Each individual project requires reporting within the framework of the main project. This requires teachers to provide brief written reports and to contribute towards a final report in writing and/or verbally.
5. They are also expected to share information with colleagues, be it within individual disciplines, departments, staff meetings, internal or external seminars and conferences, all depending on what is deemed relevant.

The first of these requirements was met without problems. The teachers could possibly have made more of a point of the note-taking in order to generate a broad knowledge base for the ongoing assessment of the students’ progress and for the final evaluation. Only one of the teachers commented on this, saying that “I worked quite well with the students during the lessons, but it could have been so much better had I kept a stricter schedule right from the start and followed up on the students more during the autumn”.



Most of the participating students were not familiar with taking notes about what they were doing. It is therefore necessary to better prepare the students and to highlight why notes on what they are doing and on how they evaluate their own progress are important on a goal-orientated project as documentation of the learning process they are going through. Their experiences must not remain private but be shared with others in reports and other communication; there is a reason why they must be particular about aiding their memories with written notes. Interviews with students even a short while after the project had concluded could contain comments such as “Now, what did I actually do...”. This ties in with the third point, whereby those in charge of the projects have to tell the students what is expected of them at the outset.

The fourth point is being followed up on by the teachers, and I shall return to the last point later.

A written final evaluation was carried out whereby the teachers answered a set of questions. The question “In which way did the project deviate from a normal teaching situation?” elicited a variety of answers from the teachers. The project presented in Chapter 6 differed greatly from the usual learning process since it was conducted by email. The complete opposite is expressed by another teacher, whose project involved one-to-one teaching with a student (see Chapter 2). In that instance the situation departed from the norm “only when you [HJ] were there by the nature of your presence”. During these two observation lessons, I asked a few questions and gave a few assessments of the student’s progress.

For the other two teachers there was little divergence from the normal teaching situation. One was satisfied that she “managed to implement the project to make it a natural part of the lesson. One stand-out factor was when I asked a student to practise with my being a ‘fly on the wall’. This was an interesting exercise that revealed how the student practises, for better or for worse. I think I’ll do this more often”. The other teacher brings up the classes / group lessons where the students, principal instrument teacher and AT teacher were present (see Chapter 6). The group situation itself was familiar to the students; the “only” new element was the presence of a proactive AT teacher.

One of the teachers participating in the Alexander Technique project found that the students’ understanding of the importance of correct posture improved greatly after the issue was addressed in a dedicated project.

Did the project format divert time from other tasks? Only one teacher hints at this when saying that “the project has diverged from the normal teaching situation in that there was less time on my timetable to cover ordinary repertoire practice and interpretation”.

The projects are intended as an element of the ordinary teaching process, which covers a wider range of topics than those addressed by the project. The balance between “the ordinary” and “the project” should be discussed and evaluated for each individual project. Irrespective of scope, some features of the projects must always be present, such as planning, structure, observation of what is happening, recording the students’ progress and key events. These are processes that take place in all teaching contexts, but a project normally requires more reflection and documentation than ongoing tuition.

Pedagogical development projects should either develop new knowledge or look at “old” knowledge with a fresh pair of eyes. The projects are not aimed at finding unequivocal answers or solutions to issues surrounding instrumental teaching, in so far as that is even possible, but rather to highlight a given topic within the natural confines of the study programme. This is in order to gain an insight into what the teacher and students actually do and then to reflect on the process and outcomes. It means that the project becomes a situation in which the teacher examines his or her own teaching, and the students become involved in joint reflection on the selected topics. The research method most closely related to this approach is action research; research which drives development and not merely observes the status quo. This perspective was not introduced at this project stage, but it may be beneficial to do so as a framework for future projects.

### **7.3. Studying own practices**

Four of the projects entailed studying own teaching practices and the consequences of them. The other two projects involved external teachers in naprapathy and Alexander Technique respectively, in which the principal instrument teacher played a slightly more mixed role.

The teachers’ main obstacle to studying their own practices is deciding on the degree of openness and balance to display when their experiences are being collated and evaluated. Are we looking to challenge or to seek affirmation of the

way we “normally” do things? Are we critical enough of our own actions and of the way we evaluate their effects?

This topic was not raised during the project, but it must be articulated before new projects are launched and reflected upon during those projects. My impression was that all the teachers were sufficiently critical of activities and outcomes in the sense that they identified aspects that could be improved and alternatives that should be tried out. I will address the scope for more in-depth questions and comments from my colleagues in the group when evaluating the group process (see below).

#### **7.4. The teachers’ evaluation of the impact of the staff group**

The group started with all six project participants attending. After the first semester one of them was unable to attend the joint meetings, but the project was completed and communication went through me.

There were five meetings each lasting two hours during the 2014 autumn semester and four meetings in the 2015 spring semester. The meetings heard updates on the progress of the projects, comments and questions were posed, and issues concerning management and communication were discussed.

The teachers’ opinions on the function and significance of the staff group were aired at some of the group meetings, and in the written final evaluation, they were asked to consider these questions:

##### *1. How did you find the group meetings?*

The teachers said the meetings were a good forum for disseminating information from the projects. Comments such as “my colleagues were very interested and communicative”, “great to be able to talk about my project” and “a good arena for airing my thoughts about the project and the subject of practice generally” reflect the majority view. They often linked this in with the other projects providing “inspiration [...] to try out different approaches to teaching the students how to practise”.

Although the projects involved different instruments, there was also a degree of transferable themes and knowledge. One of the teachers felt it was a “privilege to

sit in the presence of so much expertise and delve into different types of problems”, while another said that “I have greatly appreciated the group’s method of working – the freedom to develop your own project while also being able to discuss issues surrounding practice with colleagues. It has been very inspiring”.

2. *Do you have any suggestions as to how the existing group format can be refined or improved?*

More thorough discussions are what will make the greatest improvements. “We are all passionate about teaching, and I think that could have been highlighted more. The discussions were usually not particularly probing. We could probably have learnt more from each other,” writes one of the teachers, while another argues that “sometimes I missed a more rigorous approach to thematics. It might have been an idea to announce topics for some of the meetings in advance. I think we could’ve had an interesting discussion on issues such as ‘what does good music practice entail?’”.

I take the same view. The climate in the group has been very supportive, but the challenge lies in combining this with questions and input that lead us to reflections we have yet to make but which should be made.

The number and duration of meetings have also been a challenge. One of the teachers puts it like this: “This year we have met once a month for two hours or so each time. I eventually began to notice that it was easy to ‘lose momentum’ since there were relatively long intervals between meetings and because each meeting was fairly short. Perhaps we could have held longer meetings a couple of times each semester where each participant had prepared more thoroughly a set of common problems for everyone to discuss.”

The proposal to raise particular topics during the meetings was supported by the teachers and could be implemented in the way the teacher suggests. The project manager could prepare contributions and receive questions and input from the others, and any background research on the topic could be identified and used alongside the experiences of the participating teachers. This would strengthen the role of the meetings in providing guidance to colleagues and in competency development. One teacher wishes to further improve knowledge transfer by “inviting our colleagues to our student classes so that we can observe and experience each other’s projects not just through discussion at the group meetings but also in ‘real life’”. Another touches upon the same idea: “Perhaps you need to

observe other people's teaching, discuss with them, and simply be more hands-on." These are suggestions that need to be considered for the next round of projects.

3. *Do you have plans to participate in or organise a similar form of collaboration with colleagues after this group is dissolved?*

Members of the staff group are open to seeking knowledge from their colleagues and to sharing their own knowledge with others. For instance, one of the teachers writes that "for me the group meetings have actually been more of an arena for getting to know my colleagues better in a professional sense with the opportunity to go into further detail outside the meetings".

All of them have expressed an interest in entering into some sort of collaboration with colleagues. Two of the participants cited plans to continue existing collaborations across different instruments. Another plan put forward by one of the instrumental departments is to launch joint classes on the subject of practice involving different instruments, and two of the teachers have mentioned collaborations with colleagues that have been in place for years. One of the teachers, however, answered the above question thus: "Unlikely. Perhaps on a one-to-one basis, and without the project label."

The prevailing view is that the teachers want to co-operate on relevant topics and that this can be designed and take place in a variety of ways. For the CEMPE and NMH this is a good springboard for action.

## 7.5. Changes to teaching as a result of the project

"Will the knowledge you have gained of your own teaching practices during the project result in changes to your day-to-day teaching?" This was one of the questions put to the teachers. The main tendency in the answers was that the teachers (with one exception, see Chapter 6) were familiar with the theme of the project and that it formed part of their ordinary teaching practices. However, the teachers did express the view that the project provided a clearer focus and increased awareness of the theme. They did so with such statements:

Even before the project began the issue of posture was something very prominent and important to me. But working with the AT teacher and my

students gave me even greater insight into how to deal with it in my day-to-day teaching.

I suppose I have always talked a lot about practising in my lessons; how they should practise and why. I have become even more conscious of involving the students in my thought process surrounding practice and ensuring that they understand why they have to practise like this and like that while also being open to any practice suggestions they may make.

My focus has probably been heightened but not to the extent that there have been any day-to-day changes.

One teacher describes how a department covering multiple instruments may start running joint practice classes across different instruments. "I have passed on ideas surrounding this both in departmental meetings and in conversations with colleagues. There is much interest amongst the staff in getting this underway."

The three teachers who received personal guidance from the AT teacher emphasise the importance of the tuition to their future teaching, such as: "I have been able to go into more depth and also to experience AT on a personal level – completely unique in terms of increasing the effects of AT as an elective subject and improving the students' development."

The main conclusion is therefore that the experiences gained from the project have reinforced the teachers' approach to teaching practice techniques and that this will lead to at least some changes to this aspect of teaching during instrumental lessons.

## **7.6. Disseminating the project**

In the evaluation the teachers were asked: "How have you and your colleagues disseminated information about the project to colleagues or others? What has the response been? Do you have any suggestions regarding the issue of dissemination?"

The project participants were encouraged to share information about the project with colleagues and others. The bulk of dissemination can of course take place once the project has been concluded, although interim information may also be of use. During the project period information about all the projects was shared with

the international Reflective Conservatoire conference at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London in February/March. Two of the projects (see Chapters 2 and 5) were given a more in-depth presentation by the teachers. Project information was also disseminated at the NMH conference National Seminar on Practice and Learning how to Practise in January 2015. Teachers and students from the NMH attended along with teachers from two other higher music education institutions and from upper secondary schools and municipal arts and music schools. Attendees at a national seminar about the NMH Talent Programme were also informed about the projects.

Dissemination to colleagues at and outside the NMH has so far been limited. Three of the teachers have raised their project topics with colleagues and were met with mixed interest. One teacher who met interested teachers at a course outside the NMH remarks that “the X department (at the NMH) is showing less interest, sadly”, while another concludes that “the reactions were largely positive” when disseminating information within the instrumental department and to individual colleagues. The project manager and CEMPE director have also given presentations to some instrumental departments, as have two of the project participants.

All these presentations focused on the educational aspects of the projects. The collaboration within the group must also be part of the information we present in order to highlight the potential of this method of working.

Most of the dissemination will take place now that the projects have been completed, and a number of arenas have been planned.

## **7.7. Practice as a taught subject**

When a performance student completes the bachelor programme at the NMH he or she is expected to “master appropriate techniques for rehearsing, practising, performance preparation and prevention of playing-related injuries”. For the most part this implies that the principal instrument teachers provide teaching to qualify the students in learning and practice, while knowledge of performance preparation and playing-related injuries are addressed in other fora.

Firstly, I must concur with this remark by one of the teachers: “I am convinced that all teachers teach a lot about practice to their students.” However: “It probably

varies a bit from teacher to teacher, and I think that greater focus on this issue could benefit the students.”

One way of creating “greater focus” on teaching about practice is to establish whether any of the students need to be given priority. New students spring to mind in this respect. One of the teachers is planning to launch a “practice project for all new students in the first semester. I think this will help the students establish good practice routines right at the start of their course”.

In addition to the teaching given in the one-to-one lessons, teachers can also make use of classes where all of the teacher’s students are present. Some of these classes could involve practice as a separate topic, linked to the students’ playing and reflections on their own practicing. Here and in other settings, the students could benefit from observations and comments from their peers. This sharing of knowledge and experiences between teachers and students during individual and group lessons has been part of the NMH timetable for a long time. The new thing is that the topic of practice may now become a permanent feature in these lessons.

Another way of limiting classes to one instrument while involving greater numbers of students has been adopted by the piano department. All first-year piano students must attend classes in repertoire practice. In these classes the students work on repertoire they are currently studying. They describe the challenges they face, how they have chosen to approach the piece, and they receive feedback from their peers. The teacher says “these lessons scored highly during the evaluation”.

Instrumental diversity can also be broadened by having all first-year students come together, “perhaps for a few introductory lectures, before splitting up in groups for each instrument. Each group could involve four-five students supervised by a teacher for a few weeks, then the same group without a teacher for the rest of the semester / academic year. The main focus should be on identifying what to work on and articulating how to do it. The group should use the pieces that the students are working on as a starting point and discuss possible solutions to problems”.

From the above suggestions, we can infer a few key issues: the importance of linking the teaching of practice to instrument and playing, the importance of getting feedback from both teacher and peers, and the importance of timetabling separate lessons on the topic of practice or introducing practice strategies as a dedicated and regular element in both one-to-one and group lessons. We are also reminded of the needs of new students. One of the teachers reports that “some



students struggle more than others to appreciate what constitutes good and productive practice, and as far as I am concerned it is they who would benefit from a subject that provides the support they need”.

Lectures on practice techniques were also mooted. Here it will be possible to supplement what is likely to be mostly experience-based teaching of practice strategies with research-based knowledge. Much of this is knowledge that is broadly relevant to all or most instruments, but also knowledge of practice on individual instruments. Principal instrument teachers may of course already possess, or wish to obtain, such knowledge. This topic was raised by many of the participants during the staff group meetings and commented upon in the project evaluation. For example: “I am in favour of improving principal instrument teaching by providing further training for teachers. Practice should be an integral part of such training.”

As mentioned above, over the next three years we will be working on projects to highlight how practice strategies are and can be taught. We will be addressing topics relating to the planning, execution and evaluation of music practice, of the importance of and interaction between the body and mind, and we will be seeking to understand key processes and activities during practice. One of the teachers puts it like this: “It is through reflection, awareness of the physical and the emotional, being able to articulate things, observing fellow students, having the courage to explore, and effective communication and feedback processes that we achieve good musical results and become a good ‘practiser’. Such objectives should be incorporated into all subjects, especially principal instrument teaching and related performance subjects. A comprehensive study programme and the organisation of subjects designed to facilitate development in these categories are therefore important.” This could provide a good starting point for further deliberation on practice as a ‘subject’.

## **7.8. Conclusion**

Members of the staff group are open to seeking knowledge from their colleagues and to sharing their experiences with others. They are also open to continued collaboration with colleagues, either informally or in established projects.

The evaluation, based on the teachers' input with additional comments from me, has pointed to some aspects of the group process and the organisation of the projects that would be useful in the continuation:

- The projects are pedagogical development projects, and they are predominantly studies into our own teaching methods. It is important to establish right from the start what this entails and what we should do and look out for.
- The group meetings have been good fora for disseminating information from the projects. Better prepared and more thorough discussions are what will make the greatest improvements.

The main conclusion is therefore that the experiences gained from the project have reinforced the teachers' approach to teaching practice and that this will lead to at least some changes to this aspect of their lessons. This is an important outcome in respect of the overarching goal of the project: to help ensure broad and effective teaching about practice at the Norwegian Academy of Music.



Practising is essential to performance students, and as a part of their education, they must be taught how to practice with quality. This report shows some of the results from the project “Teaching of Practising”, a project involving principal teachers at the Norwegian Academy of Music, who work on developing various aspects concerning the teaching of practising.

The project is one of seven run by the Centre of Excellence in Music Performance Education.

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