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Getting in the Zone, Part 1: Flow and Finding a State of Peak Performance

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PEOPLE CALL IT DIFFERENT NAMES: in the zone, in the groove, on fire, in the moment, present, unified, tuned in, a high, a rush. All these terms describe a similar sensation. One of my first experiences of being “in the zone” was at the finals for a NATS competition during my senior year of undergraduate studies. I was singing Papageno’s suicide aria from *Die Zauberflöte*, and, near the beginning of the aria, made a reaching gesture with my right hand. I remember watching my hand and arm shake violently and a sense of terror crept over me. In that moment, a very simple thought came to me: “No.” My hand stopped shaking, my mind focused on the moment at hand, and I experienced a fascinating connection with the world around me. It was as if I could feel the audience, my pianist, and the music as never before. Time slowed down and I felt a unification of body, mind, and voice. It was as if I could do no wrong. And, in the blink of an eye, the aria was over. It was some of the most fun I had ever had performing. “This,” I said to myself. “I want more of this.” I later learned that what I had experienced is what Hungarian-born psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls “flow.”

MIHALY CSIKSZENTMIHALYI AND THE CONCEPT OF FLOW

For the first decade or so of his career Csikszentmihalyi’s primary focus was on the study of creativity. Rather than treating creativity as a single entity, Csikszentmihalyi’s work emphasized the environment in which creativity occurs and the interactions of others with the creative individual.¹ His work investigates not only the creative process, but also the experiences of those involved in that process. He stated, “I was most interested in the individuals whose actions led to the attribution of creativity. What kinds of people achieve a reputation for creativity? What kind of lives do they live?”² In the 1980s, with the support of the Spencer Foundation, he began a large-scale in-depth interview process with ninety-one creative individuals in various domains including history, music, poetry, chemistry, and physics, among others. Each of these individuals was a notable figure within their respective fields, twelve having received Nobel Prizes. This research led to the publication of numerous articles and the book *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*.³

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Concurrent with his research into creativity was an exploration into attention, or, to use Csikszentmihalyi's term, "psychic energy."⁴ He, along with several others in the field, argues that attention is finite: humans can attend to or focus on only a limited number of things before the brain runs out of conscious computational power.⁵ Assuming this is true, where one places attention has enormous repercussions on the quality of life.⁶ As Csikszentmihalyi states, "Whatever else life might be, the only evidence we have of it, the only direct data to which we have access, is the succession of events in consciousness. The quality of these experiences determines whether and to what extent life was worth living."⁷

This line of thinking eventually led to the development of the field of positive psychology. In the introduction to a seminal issue of the *American Psychologist* dedicated to positive psychology, Csikszentmihalyi and then president of the American Psychological Association and co-progenitor of positive psychology Martin Seligman state:

[The social and behavioral sciences] can articulate a vision of the good life that is empirically sound while being understandable and attractive. They can show what actions lead to well-being, to positive individuals, and to thriving communities. Psychology should be able to help document what kinds of families result in children who flourish, what work settings support the greatest satisfaction among workers, what policies result in the strongest civic engagement, and how people's lives can be most worth living . . . the aim of positive psychology is to begin to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities.⁸

Over the past decade and a half, the field of positive psychology has grown enormously, gaining support and creating for itself a place within the larger field of psychology.

Csikszentmihalyi's major contribution to the field of positive psychology is his concept of flow. He defined flow as "a state of consciousness where one becomes totally absorbed in what one is doing, to the exclusion of all other thoughts and emotions."⁹ In his words, "a good life is one that is characterized by complete absorption in what one does."¹⁰ Along with this intense focus comes a unification of mind and body that allows the individual to function at her fullest capacity.¹¹ The

body moves effortlessly, and practiced technique occurs without thought, almost automatically. This generates an intense sense of control, which "frees [the individual] from fear of failure and creates a feeling of empowerment for the challenging tasks to be executed."¹² Other characteristics of flow include a distorted awareness of time, an increased sense of unity with oneself and others, and a sense of intrinsic or autotelic (*auto*= self, *telos*= goal) motivation.¹³ These sensations are fairly ubiquitous across a whole range of disciplines and activities, including the visual arts, chess, rock climbing, dance, sport, literature, education and learning, and music, to name a few.¹⁴

The benefits of flow to performers are numerous. When in flow, the mind focuses solely on the present task.¹⁵ Extraneous concerns (the flat tire you had on the way to rehearsal, your mortgage payment, earning the approval of critics) slip away. The conscious mind begins to quiet, and as it does the psyche and soma unify, allowing practiced techniques to actuate in a more holistic manner. The increased sense of control and confidence can free a singer from inhibitions, allowing more expressive, creative, and moving performances. Singers who experience flow will experience a growing sense of unity not just within themselves, but may also experience a stronger sense of ensemble with the entire cast, accompanying pianist or orchestra, and a deeper connection with the audience. Learning to enter flow states can be a valuable component of a singer's performance technique.

There are several factors that Csikszentmihalyi emphasizes are essential to experiencing flow, but perhaps the three most important for singers are: challenge/skill ratio, focus or attention, and goals and feedback. The rest of this article will investigate the challenge/skill ratio and explore the relationship between constraint and creativity. Part 2 will discuss how attention and goal setting contribute to the process and will provide several methods to apply these concepts in the voice studio.

THE CHALLENGE/SKILL RATIO

According to Csikszentmihalyi, one of the key requirements for entering a state of flow is finding a balance between the perceived challenge of a particular task and one's skill at completing that task.¹⁶ The task must be

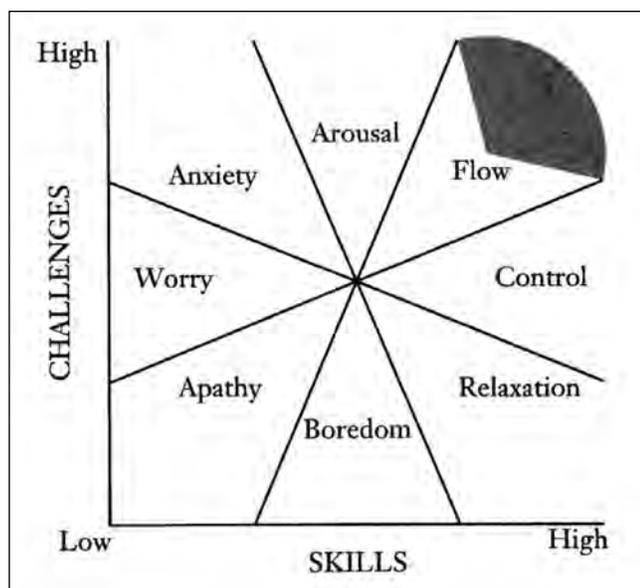


Figure 1. Excerpted from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*, 1997. Available from Basic Books, an imprint of Perseus Books, LLC, a subsidiary of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

challenging enough to demand all of a person's attention, but not so challenging that the individual has no hope of accomplishing it. One rower described this balance as "challenging, but able to meet the challenge."¹⁷

Csikszentmihalyi's flow model is a wonderful graphic that illustrates the importance of finding this balance (Figure 1). If the task is too easy and requires little skill to complete, individuals will experience boredom or apathy. If, on the other hand, the task is too difficult for the individual's current set of skills, he will experience worry or anxiety. Finding a task that the individual perceives as challenging but feels he has the ability to complete successfully is paramount to inducing flow states.

What is interesting about this flow model is that the individual's perception of challenge and skill is more important than the actuality: there is no concrete threshold for either challenge or skill.¹⁸ Rather, the perception changes from person to person and task to task. This has several ramifications. First, it means that flow is available to both beginners and advanced singers.¹⁹ For a beginning singer, the early Italian aria "Caro mio ben" poses a considerable challenge, but one that she is perfectly capable of meeting, given proper teaching. However, more advanced students might

find such seemingly simple repertoire boring. As their skill set grows, they may require more challenging and demanding repertoire.

Second, it means that challenge and skill are relative and determined largely by one's attitude. Sport psychologist Susan Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi stated, "It is important to realize what you *believe* you can do will determine your experience more than will your actual abilities."²⁰ This thought can be extended to state that what one believes is challenging determines one's experience more than the actual challenge.

Third, challenge and skill are in a constant state of flux. With each semester of study, a singer's skill ideally increases. To facilitate flow experiences, the perceived challenge of the repertoire or performance must also increase proportionately to the increase in skill. This does not necessarily mean that a student must sing progressively more and more challenging repertoire (though, of course, this is one solution). Simple music can be just as challenging and engaging if the performer has enough imagination. In fact, truly great singers are able to elevate even the most simple or basic piece of music to that of expressive art (e.g., the numerous recordings of "Caro mio ben" on YouTube by singers such as Pavarotti, Hvorostovsky, Carreras, and Wunderlich).²¹

One way to increase the challenge of a given task as students advance is by the addition of constraints or restrictions. Though popular culture may have, in many respects, introduced the notion of the Bohemian artist archetype whose creative output is directly related to her unconstrained and uninhibited lifestyle, empirical and anecdotal evidence indicates that constraints may be an essential part of the creative process.

According to Csikszentmihalyi and co-author Sami Abuhamedh, the so-called artistic temperament may have its roots in the writings of painter and art critic Giorgio Vasari in the mid-1500s. Vasari claimed that artists in his time had, "a certain element of savagery and madness . . . making them strange and eccentric."²² Over the past 500 years, the idea of the artistic temperament has transformed and modified, but the archetype of the eccentric, Bohemian artist still remains prevalent in popular culture and thought. However, Csikszentmihalyi and Abuhamedh propose that "the notion of the 'artistic personality' is more myth than fact . . . artistic creativity

is as much a social and cultural phenomenon as it is an intrapsychic one.”²³ Though studies indicate that there may be a relationship between artistic personality and the genre of art it produces, very little evidence supports the notion that the stereotypical artistic temperament, unfettered by constraint, is necessary for the creative process or even prevalent in all creative domains.²⁴ Constraint is not necessarily antithetical to creativity.

In fact, a truly unconstrained task, project, or work of art can be a daunting, even debilitating, endeavor: the sheer number of possibilities can make it difficult to know where to begin. Vincent van Gogh understood the challenges faced by a blank canvas: “You don’t know how paralyzing that is, that stare of a blank canvas is, which says to the painter, ‘You can’t do a thing.’ The canvas has an idiotic stare and mesmerizes some painters so much that they turn into idiots themselves.”²⁵ Writer John McPhee stated that,

For me, the hardest part comes first, getting something—anything—out in front of me. Sometimes in a nervous frenzy I just fling words as if I were flinging mud at a wall. Blurt out, heave out, babble out something—anything—as a first draft. With that, you have achieved a sort of nucleus.²⁶

For McPhee, this first draft serves as an anchor, allowing the creative process to flow more naturally. Writers, playwrights, and poets have adhered to or created the constraints of form, rhyme, and other poetic conventions for centuries. French poet Charles Baudelaire stated that these conventions allowed the “flowering of originality” and were not “arbitrarily invented tyrannies.”²⁷ To the cubist painter Georges Braque, “Limited means beget new forms, invite creation, make the style. Progress in art does not lie in extending its limits, but in knowing them better.”²⁸ The same holds true in musical domains. Igor Stravinsky wrote, “The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one’s self of the chains that shackle the spirit.”²⁹ Similar anecdotes can be found in science, business, and many other domains.

Princeton psychologist Philip Johnson-Laird includes constraint as one of the five determining factors in his NONCE definition of creativity (Novel to the individual, Optionally novel for society, Nondeterministic, Constrained, created of Existing elements).³⁰ At any given point in the creative process, an artist has choices.

Most people have the intuition that when they are creating something, such as improvising jazz or making an extempore speech, alternative possibilities occur at many points in the process. If they could relive the experience with no knowledge of their first effort, then they might take a different route the second time around.³¹

Johnson-Laird argues that, in many respects, the choices one makes in the creation of art are constraints governed by conventions within the field.

When I first heard bebop at the age of 12, I thought that the musicians were playing notes at random. I went to the piano and played at random; the result was not modern jazz. It has constraints. The society of musicians crystallized these constraints, which themselves were the consequences of previous creative processes.³²

Catrinel Haught’s “Green Eggs and Ham” hypothesis (named after Dr. Seuss’s famous children’s book) postulates that constraints increase creativity by precluding common or habituated ideas or solutions to a problem and promoting new ones.³³ As will be discussed in more detail in the next section, the human brain is designed to chunk certain bits of information together into patterns or associations. This allows the brain to compute large amounts of information in a short amount of time. It also predisposes the brain to come up with the same or similar solutions every time a specific problem type is encountered. By constraining the creative process to preclude the predisposed solution, one can increase the likelihood of novel or creative output.

Music, in one sense, is a language of constraint. Every pitch, rhythm, word, and dynamic marking on the page limits the number of choices a singer has. Style is another incredibly important constraint. One would not sing Mozart in the same manner as one would sing Puccini. Other constraints singers may choose to add to performances include stylistic diction, text translation, tonal color, dynamics, and dramatic intent. With each level of constraint, the difficulty or challenge of any given performance and its creative or expressive potential increases. But these more sophisticated aspects of performance can be added only when a student has attained the requisite technical skill. The overall challenge of the task, including any constraints placed upon it, must align with the skill of the performer or the chances of peak performance diminish.

LOOKING FORWARD

This article focused the origins of Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow and how one can use the challenge/skill ratio to induce flow states. Part 2 will discuss how attention and goal setting contribute to the process as well as provide a few practical strategies for implementing these concepts in the studio.

NOTES

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