



Just as elite athletes need to be aware of the interrelationship between their psychological and physical states to achieve their personal best in training and performance, so too do musicians. *Carmel Liertz* introduces her pioneering mind-body awareness programme for pianists

**W**HEN YOU PERFORM A piece of music, every part of you is involved. So it makes sense to develop ‘mind-body awareness’ – that is, an awareness of how your thoughts and emotions affect your performance, while understanding that the mind and body are inseparable. There is a cyclical reaction whereby the mind affects the body and the body affects the mind.

Sport psychology has long demonstrated that masterful athletic performance depends on positive, smooth-flowing mind-body

connections. In 1977, the psychologist Michael J Mahoney identified four categories of cognitive skills for athletic performance: Attentional Focus; Arousal Regulation (‘mind-body regulation’); Imagery; and Self-Efficacy (‘situational self-confidence’). These skills were later confirmed to be interrelated key components affecting performance, and applicable to all performance-based fields. Elite athletes have since used integrative training programmes to support these mental skills with great success.

For musicians, these same mental skills are necessary, not only to develop an

understanding of the complete picture of desired sound imagery, but also to perform the work with mastery. In order to bring the internalised, embodied music to its full actualisation in performance, smooth-flowing mind-body connections are needed to promote secure technique and clear expressive communication. With heightened mind-body awareness, musicians can develop the four key mental skills for their performance, enhancing themselves and their work.

For singers, mind-body awareness is a conscious part of their practice and ►

performance, as their instrument *is* their mind-body. Mind-body connections soon become apparent to them, and teachers make them aware of how posture, correct breathing, mental and physical processes all directly affect breath control, singing tone, technical accuracy and mental security. Singers are therefore highly self-attuned and conscious of their mind-body health.

Pianists however, are generally not taught how mind-body connections affect their practice and performance, so mind-body awareness for optimising practice and performance remains largely unfamiliar. This is despite the fact that pianists know how difficult it is to achieve quality practice when feeling depressed, irritable or unmotivated. If they notice their technical control or musical expression is lacking without being able to recover quickly, they can soon become affected by anxiousness and loss of confidence.

At some stage of their development, pianists may need to confront unwanted mental/physical habits hindering their performance preparation. If such difficulties persist, it is wise to seek a performance coach before mind-body health suffers along with performance ability. Elite athletes have a sport coach, sport psychologist, nutritionist and physiotherapist assisting them, while top performing artists now engage performance coaches to maintain their edge. Pianists should not feel they have to suffer alone, or resort to medications such as beta-blockers.

It was my tertiary piano students' difficulties in managing performance that set me on the path of researching sport psychology. My aim was to create a holistic programme to develop and enhance mind-body strategies in order that musicians could achieve optimal performance. The trials of tertiary musicians who were following this programme led to an unexpected increase in confidence during performance. It has become apparent to me from my case studies research and from 16 years as performance coach, that pianists (and indeed all musicians) can learn to solve many of their mental and physical challenges using strategies that complement traditional teaching approaches.

Benefits that enhanced mind-body awareness can bring to pianists include:

- ▶ increased focus and concentration ability
- ▶ ability to re-focus quickly after distracting thoughts
- ▶ ability to get 'in the zone' (switch on a focused state just before playing)
- ▶ ability to regulate one's mind-body, including pacing emotional energy during practice and performance
- ▶ increased sense of the 'internal' image (how the music should sound), as well as the 'external' image in performance (posture, hand and body movements, stage presence)
- ▶ increased sense of control in practice and performance

### TECHNIQUES TO DEVELOP MIND-BODY AWARENESS

#### **Practise an attitude of mindfulness**

Being present in the moment, paying attention. Be mindful of mental/physical habits that create quality practice – eg shorter, focused blocks of practice with regular breaks for reflection, analysis, recovery, healthy nutrition and water.

#### **Re-frame negative thoughts**

Engage in positive self-talk, so this can happen automatically in practice and performance.

#### **Use a practice diary to note mind-body interactions**

Learn how to keep these interactions positive. Include goal-setting to visualise achieving short-term / long-term goals.

#### **Take regular time out in nature**

This will maintain mind-body balance and health. Walking, especially in natural environments, increases creativity, relaxes and re-energises the mind-body.

#### **Stretching**

This will release physical tension before practice and performance.

#### **Choose healthy nutrition**

Avoid sugar, caffeine and processed foods, all of which affect the mind-body in performance.



Stretching releases physical tension before practice and performance

Pianists can develop an authentic style of performing emanating from their innermost being. Becoming attuned to one's mind-body (including honouring personal requirements and sensitivities) develops the necessary insight to know *when* and *how* to regulate one's mind-body, in order to shine in performance.

Finally, as pianists become more aware of their mind-bodies to achieve their personal best in practice and performance, they will undoubtedly realise that they themselves are the main drivers of their abilities, confidence and success. This will give them the self-confidence to manage the many challenges they face in today's fast-paced professional world. 🎵

*Performance Coach, Carmel Liertz, created the first training strategies programme to develop musicians' performance confidence, based on mind-body awareness principles applied from sport psychology and sport performance nutrition. As a young pianist-performer, she observed how elite athletes exhibited command over their mind-bodies to create masterful performances.*

*Carmel Liertz's Training Strategies Program Book details how 'calm', 'focus', and 'sustained energy' can be increased in practice and performance, while promoting mind-body health for performance confidence.*  
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