

Know thyself: a return to wholeness

by Niall O’Riordan

- Do you feel that you could express yourself musically more fully but don’t know how?
- Are you inclined to criticize yourself for the smallest things?
- Are you overly concerned about what others think of you and your playing?
- Are you fearful of getting it wrong?
- Does nervousness or anxiety get in the way of performing your best?
- Are you a perfectionist? Does this prevent you from getting out there and performing, following your dream, or taking action?
- Do you find it difficult to trust your talent and ability?
- Do you have tension in your body when playing?
- Do you suffer from aches and pains due to flute playing?
- Are you passionate about the flute but somehow can’t access this feeling in your playing?

Reflecting on the above questions most musicians at one point or another answer yes to at least some of these; I certainly have - to all of them - and I continue to work with the challenges that some present to me. If you look a little bit closer you will note that many of these questions concern issues that an instrumental teacher is not trained to deal with. They may have briefly been touched upon in music college for some students (if they are lucky) but rarely in any significant depth. These topics deal with mind, body, and spirit, and my own search for answers to these questions has been the catalyst for deep personal growth and self-discovery. It has resulted in taking a direction in my professional career that involves helping others overcome these issues for themselves.

Know thyself

Why do you play your music? What’s important about it for you? I’m guessing that most of you will give an answer that includes the concept of ‘expressing yourself’. But what is the self? Is it merely what you experience day-to-day or is there something more to it? I certainly believe that most of us have an inner knowing that that says that there is something more to us than our current experience. Musically speaking this could be a feeling that says ‘I’m capable of more’. Speaking personally, I struggled with this feeling, not knowing how to experience the ‘more’ that I longed to express. I searched outside myself but, eventually, I began to realise that the answer resided within.

What makes any musical performance magical is authentic self-expression. In fact, it’s what makes any artistic expression magical. In Jungian psychology, the self is written with a capital S. While the ego is the centre of consciousness, the Self is the

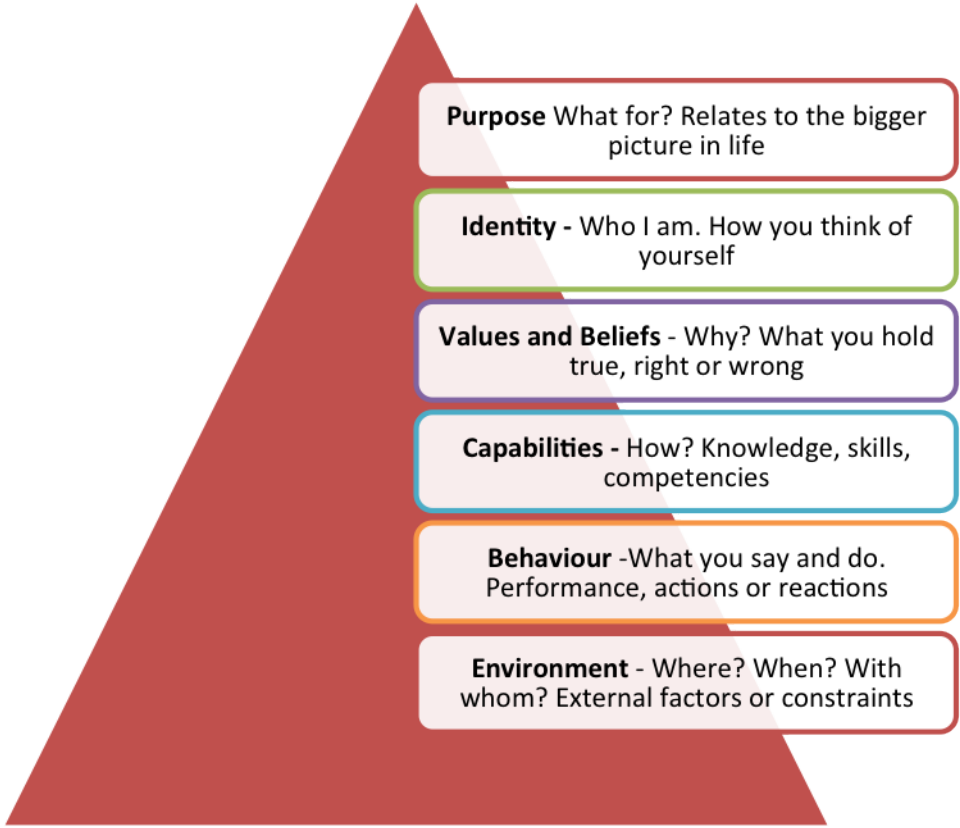
centre of the total personality, which includes consciousness, the unconscious, and the ego. Coming to this concept through my background in the Feldenkrais method I would say that your full potential resides in your innate human capacity to learn.

Two voices

The voice of the ego can be loud and relentless. It can trick you into thinking that it is where the centre of your expression and creativity resides. In a search to satisfy your thirst for self-expression you are merely drinking from a thimble, whereas the path to the Self will lead you to the ocean. Jung called this journey individuation. The concept of self-expression is exactly as it says: ‘expressing the Self’. Music can serve as this journey if approached with the right attitude. Music has been used as a path for personal growth throughout the world, most notably as a spiritual practice. In many such approaches, its sole purpose is as a method of meditation, to quieten the voice of the ego so that the Self can emerge. Considering this idea, and the concerns some of us have, it makes one wonder at what point we moved away from this understanding of the role of music in our lives. It also puts these opening questions into a different perspective.

Logical levels of Change

Another way reflecting on the questions posed at the beginning of this article is through this diagram used in Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). Keeping it very simple, most of the time in an instrumental lesson we are working at a skills level, that is, working with a student’s **Capabilities** and on the



technicalities that provide them with tools to express him or herself. The higher up you go in the pyramid the more potency each level has to influence changes in a person’s life: in our case, as musicians, to influence changes in how we play. They also can significantly influence change on the levels beneath. Many of my opening questions actually centre around the level of **Identity**. The beliefs we hold about ourselves as a musician, if negative or self-defeating, can act like a ceiling. No matter how much we work at the lower levels we somehow feel stuck. If we use modalities that influence our identity, that is, how we think about and perceive ourselves, and find a more positive, supportive self-image, we will also notice changes in our values and beliefs, skills, behaviour and environment.

When I asked you in a previous paragraph the following: Why do you play your music? What’s important about it for you? I was pointing in the direction of connecting with your **Purpose**, the highest level in the pyramid. This is something that we can lose contact with very easily. Keeping connection to your purpose will inspire authenticity in how you express yourself.

A journey to Wholeness

There are many paths on this journey to wholeness. My desire to help people move beyond their perceived limitation has grown steadily over the years. I have realised that in order to help people find authentic self-expression, the type

of expression that makes a mark on the world. I needed to broaden my knowledge and expertise. This has led me to train professionally in the Feldenkrais method and, most recently, to develop a keen interest in Jungian psychology. Other modalities that I have explored in depth over the years include NLP, yoga practice and philosophy, meditation, metaphysics, and life coaching.

In the last year I have collaborated with four other flautists from around the world to create ‘Whole Musician’. The group came together as a meeting of minds during the First Canadian Flute Convention where we shared a common enthusiasm for finding a new perspective in musical education. Our goal is simple: ‘To address the mental, physical, and musical demands placed on the 21st century performer and to offer a retreat experience that facilitates growth and authentic self expression.’ We want to create a safe space to explore some of the questions I opened with. Knowing that some of the issues that we face as musicians reach far beyond the technicalities of the instrument, we hope to offer an experience that reaches into the issues of the mind and body while simultaneously nurturing the soul.

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More about Whole Musician at www.wholemusician.net
More from Niall at www.niallflute.com

Getting going

Myra Baker on the challenges of starting a lesson effectively

Just occasionally, the lessons that I teach don't quite start according to plan. There are the times that I open the practice room door to no one; a quick jaunt around a school looking for a pupil tends to have an impact on the remaining lesson time. There are the times when you open the door to two pupils looking nervously at each other, one secretly knowing that the other has the wrong lesson time. Somehow, explaining to a pupil that we shall not meet again until next week, despite the joyous time had together yesterday discovering that every single 'f' in G major is indeed a sharp, takes time and eats into the start of someone else's lesson. There are the times that a member of staff has been peering hopefully through my door for at least the past hour, and I really must see if there is a problem. There are times when I have asked a student to come and collect something from me and invariably then can't find the said piece of music/form/information. Frustrating as all this is, it is folly to pretend that it never happens. Fire alarms, bad traffic, late school buses....it's what happens when you interact with life.

So what does one do with the constraints of diminished lesson time? Cut straight to the chase and hear the fruits of the week's labours? Possibly. I admire those of you for whom this works, because for me it never does.

I used to wonder why the changeover of lessons would sometimes leave me feeling somewhat de-energised and surprisingly reluctant to start with the next pupil. In a gradual dawning of self-awareness, I have come to think that this feeling is actually because the start of lessons is the hard bit. It's like starting to cycle up a hill every single time.

Let me explain. My pupils come to me mainly during the school day. They are fresh from chemistry, history, PE or whatever. Their thoughts are anywhere but on flute playing when they arrive. Those that I see in an evening have occasionally been practising, but usually not immediately before they arrive. The start of the lesson, therefore, becomes a time for greetings, catching up, deciding what our starting point is, and getting the mind ready for flute playing. It's nought to a hundred in a very short space of time. And more to the point, I have to try and take us there.

I rather tenuously describe the start of my lessons as a 'warm-up'. I don't mean this at all. Yes, the exercises I take students through do gently get the relevant parts of their bodies moving, but actually it's pure technical focus. I also like to think that this may help the mental shift towards flute playing. Possibly, if we follow roughly the same format every week (with gradual changes as ability improves), the mind will associate this physical process with a switch to flute thoughts. A conditioned reaction if you like.

I'm not entirely sure of the route that led me to adopt this approach. I do know that the years I spent playing the piano for ballet classes opened my eyes to teaching practices within that discipline, which rely heavily on weekly repetitions of the same stretches at the start of lessons. Every Pilates class I ever attended started with the same calm focus and simple exercises.

In flute terms, this means that I always start with something long, slow, breathing and sound related. For the youngest students, long notes. Octave slurs for most. Harmonics or one of

the many Moyse *Grandes Liaisons* type exercises for the more able. Normally I play too. I quite like harmonising in simple thirds. It's a lovely calm moment in the lesson, and with little else to listen to I find students emulating tone and breathing far better than when we study pieces. The first thing that we play never involves music. Ever. All those notes just get in the way of thinking about the matter in hand. From here I generally move to tonguing and fingering. Whatever we do, pieces come afterwards. It would feel like eating pudding before main course to do it any other way.

On the back of a proper technical warm-up I think students always find themselves secretly a little pleased with their playing during the lesson. Things start to work in a way that perhaps they don't at home, when the practice routine is lacking in any kind of foundation. I also think that however anxious someone may be about their lack of progress during the week, for at least part of our time together, this isn't an issue. I'm not really one for reprimand anyway, but at least whilst we're tootling away together trying to capture that small embouchure movement from one octave to the next, there is, in that moment, nothing to be anxious about. Students are tested so much, in so many different ways these days, I really do believe that small gestures of working at something together are important. If the lesson simply becomes yet another pass or fail situation during the week it is easy to see how the joy of music making can be eroded.

I have a policy of limiting time attending to bad habits, which does seem to produce results for students.

What I mean by this is that during our exercises, maximum attention is given to the hand position, posture, embouchure, or whatever is of current concern. Once we move to the pieces, however, we make music first and foremost and worry about the technical issues in a far less intense way. I try this to avoid concentrating on one particular element at the expense of all other learning. There is a time and a place for this kind of distilled approach to correction of technique, and to be honest it can be hard, as one's tendency as a teacher is to auto-correct with alarming frequency. Being shown how to improve a facet of a piece through specific strategies is one thing, but a whole 30 minutes of reference to a poor embouchure, week after week, is undoubtedly demoralizing in the extreme.

A short period of exception to this lesson pattern is during the weeks approaching examinations. Lesson time is so short, especially with more advanced grades, that a quick romp through some scales for a couple of weeks has to suffice by way of getting started. I really dislike the way that exams change the focus of lessons, and try for as long as possible to maintain the practice of good warm-ups, however much we have to do. But candidates tend to feel short-changed, and why shouldn't they, if the teacher hasn't actually heard everything through, scales, sight-reading, the lot, in the weeks immediately prior to examination, so compromise it is, in a fairly good cause, but for as few lessons as possible.

So, to return to where we started, if a little examination compromise is acceptable, what should be the compromise when a lesson seems destined to be shorter than usual, for whatever reason?

I have tried telling students to go and warm up if the delay involves me personally. Nice idea, but my warm-up is not really warm-up. It's technique. And I want to do it with them. It's the most important part of the lesson. I want to observe, to listen, to guide, to remind my students what they actually can achieve here. To use a dancing simile, this is where we learn and practise the steps. Pieces provide a choreography of many steps put together, but we must learn to execute various movements correctly away from such complexities.

Without our opening routine, things never seem to get going properly. The airstream is insufficient, the embouchure often tight and inflexible and the mind is not focused. Pieces sound apologetic, full of potential, but to be realised on another occasion.

Put simply, if the lesson is a bit late getting started, we just carry on largely as normal. Everything might become more contracted, but it's all still there in the same order. The most important thing for me is that my students leave my room feeling that they have achieved something and had a good time doing it. I have yet to find any short cuts to this.



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