

Meg Griffith and Niall O’Riordan

# Reflections on Perfectionism

In tune with the theme of our convention, Music with Friends, it is now possible to maintain friendships from across the world through the wonders of technology. We can share ideas and support, and collaborate on topics common to us all. We as musicians have a hard time supporting ourselves, and the word ‘perfect’ can send us running in circles looking for something indefinable yet seemingly inherent in our practice. Two convention artists chatting from either side of the Atlantic via Google Chat discovered their personal yet similar insights into the power of our need to be perfect. They decided to put their ideas in writing.



Meg and Niall collaborating via Google Chat

## You Say Perfect... I Say *Perficere*

F B D F G D A B F G F E D C B A B F  
F E E F G A B C G F E E D

The letters above are not a secret code nor did my cat walk across my keyboard. These dry little letters spell out what I count as one of the most beautiful openings in the flute repertoire: the second movement to Francis Poulenc’s *Sonata for Flute and Piano* (minus the flats and sharps). Read them out loud. Are they missing something? Is there any meaning to that string of letters? What is it that gives them meaning?

As we develop our skills as musicians, we add many tools to our toolbox, allowing us to be loud and soft, accent a note here and there, play ridiculously fast, or enjoy an extra-long quiet phrase. Then, we get out on a stage in front of a bunch of people or a panel of judges to show them our latest list of

tools that we worked so hard to master. After all this, when congratulated on our hard work, we answer, ‘But it wasn’t perfect’ or some variation on that tune. Was that our original goal all this time? What exactly is it and who defines it?

My students have had a tendency to define perfect performances based first on how many notes they got right. If they read the letters above correctly, that would be perfect: a performance defined by seemingly random letters they were able to recite. But then that opens their ears and eyes to other thoughts. They might say that the rhythm was wrong (even when it sometimes was not). And if the rhythm turned out to be right, that celebration is cut short by the fact that they missed that articulation that one time. Once that issue has been solved, they realize that their sound was not what they wanted. One could continue in this manner forever, eventually ending with a final sigh over not sounding as good as so-and-so. I began to think these people I didn’t know and who were apparently

better than my students had written a manual on flute performance that I had missed.

To help my students and myself find our way, I began noting what I feel is our overuse of the word perfect. Perfection is ‘an exemplification of supreme excellence’ (Merriam Webster) and ‘the condition, state, or quality of being free or as free as possible from all flaws or defects’ (Google Dictionary). Perfect is ‘having all the required or desirable elements, qualities, or characteristics,’ making something ‘as good as it is possible to be.’ (Merriam Webster). Who actually decides what is perfect? Who made the list of ‘desirable elements?’ While these varied definitions do leave some room for interpretation, simply saying that to someone (including myself) in the midst of a self-critical moment isn’t enough, so I went deeper.

The Latin source of the word perfect, *perficere*, leads us to *per* (through, completely) and *facere* (do) which I take to encompass finishing, fully

developing, bringing something about, or fully exploring. I like this breakdown of the word better than our modern version. Suddenly, performances that may not fit within the definition of perfect but do fit within the more open view of *perficere* have a home. Now, the question of who is to decide what is *perficere* really can come from within. In that moment on stage, in your bedroom, in front of thousands or in front of no one, were you fully exploring, fully developing all you felt and wanted to convey? Was your performance built out of genuine love and connection to the music, your flute, your audience, or yourself? Was it a new expression of the piece, appearing in a unique moment that has never happened before and will never happen again? Then it was a *perficere* moment. Perfect - and completely yours.

The notes, rhythms, articulations, and so on, are all inherent in the piece that facilitated the creation of that experience and so come along for the ride but with greater purpose than simple accuracy. Our exploration and continued mastery of new aspects of those little details lead us to fully developed, fully explored performances that open our mind to how we as musicians would like those notes and rhythms to be conveyed based on our ideas, feelings, and who we happen to be during that one moment on stage. This positive and constructive approach to perfection, one that focuses on our continuous, personal journey towards maturity and development rather than impossible to attain aspects that are based outside of ourselves, is what gives those little dry letters at the top of the page their meaning. They become Sara's Poulenc Sonata, Val's Flute Sonata by Poulenc, Leigha's favourite Poulenc piece, or the Poulenc Sonata by Mario, each of which are *perficere*.

MEG GRIFFITH

## Awaken from Perfectionism

A big challenge a young musician faces is creating a balance between exam, competition or audition success without losing authentic self-expression and individuality. When we present ourselves for an exam or enter a competition it is very easy to allow ourselves to seek external validation for what we do. Our whole system of musical education teaches us to place our self-esteem outside ourselves. We come to believe that we are only as good as the number of competitions we win, or the marks we get in class – and by these we measure ourselves against our colleagues. In short, we learn that we are only as good as our achievements. I'm not against exams or competitions *per se*, I do question however, the nature of how we relate to these activities. In these circumstances we begin to cultivate a deep connection between our achievements and self-esteem. The danger is that these things are placed in the hands of somebody else; therefore, our self-esteem can be taken away in the blink of an eye. This leaves us very vulnerable, and in such cases an unfair panel decision (it does happen!) can send the self-esteem crashing.

## External Validation

We learn to seek validation from outside ourselves through exam achievements and other successes and therefore, we seek out external validation to make us feel good about ourselves. We mould and shape our playing into what we think the examiner or panel wants to hear. In these early, vulnerable years, we become a sort of musical chameleon. We wear an array of masks while our inner artist hides beneath waiting for its first breath of air. During this time many of our teachers are acting out the same story but now it is they who seek validation through how well you do as their student. This compounds the pressure and search for approval. This is one of many unhelpful generational habits passed down from teacher to pupil that I believe we need to challenge.

We love what we are doing and we want to continue at all costs. From my experience, a person's inner creativity and voice can be hidden and often starved; however, a person's love of music will remain ignited. Lost in the illusion that everything we do is measurable, we come to a conclusion that perfection exists. We equate perfection with happiness and satisfaction and search for it.

Our search is a journey for fulfillment. Whatever it is that is inside you, drawing you to do what you do, seeks realization. It seeks to be born into this world through music and has within itself the capacity to fully realize this. We mistake this sense of longing for fulfillment as being a longing for success. We hold a notion that perhaps if I am perfect in the eyes and ears of the outer world and its value system then my sense of longing will go away.

## Control

We search for success, we become perfectionists, and we tell our friends we are perfectionists with pride. Because we rely so heavily on a value system that is external we come to believe that we need to control everything around us. We become calculated in how we network with people, thinking that they might give us the success we seek. Control seeps into all aspects of how we conduct ourselves draining the last of our spontaneity and creativity. We can become neurotic in the way we practise in our drive for perfection.

## Sleeping Beauty's kiss

Throughout this journey we have travelled with a faulty compass, following a map created by others before us: they dare not tell you the truth of the matter – that they are just as lost as you. However, in your travels you may meet somebody who seems different. Their lightness of being illuminates something within you. Perhaps their playing touches you in a way that is notably different; they seem not to care about what others think about them. They validate themselves and do things their way, they sometimes make daring creative decisions; they are described by others as 'unique' 'refreshing' 'one-of-a-

kind' 'individual' 'inspiring'. They seem comfortable with their shortcomings; you may even see them laugh to themselves in these moments, not taking themselves too seriously. Meeting such a person can be like the kiss that awakens Sleeping Beauty. These are the moments when we are offered the opportunity to reframe our previous thinking and to find greater clarity. We may think to ourselves, 'I wish I could be like that', and perhaps this thought leads to deeper truth about yourself, that you may or may not allow yourself to think and which says 'I can be like that, too'.

It can be a challenge to let go of the comfort of the map that you have followed so closely for years, to withdraw your need for approval and validation from everybody around you, to let go of your perfectionism and replace this with a healthy work ethic, trust, and spontaneity, surrendering your need to control everything around you in favour of faith. As you move through this turbulent phase it may take time to find your feet again. Eventually, though, your inner compass will prove to you that you are now heading in the right direction. The map you possess now seems simple to follow. It has far fewer dead ends and the signposts along the way are clear and easy to follow. Your new experiences of satisfaction freedom and fulfillment encourage you to keep moving forward, often against the status quo. I wish you a safe and pleasant journey.

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