

NUMBER 27

PART I MUSIC

1. MUSIC AND THE FLOW STATE

Dorina Geta Iușcă¹

Abstract: *The flow state is the mental state in which a person performing an activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity. Flow is characterized by the complete absorption in what one does, and a resulting transformation in one's sense of time. Flow is the melting together of action and consciousness; the state of finding a balance between a skill and how challenging that task is. It requires a high level of concentration and a task that matches one's skill set. Music and flow go hand in hand, as a growing body of research demonstrate that many musical activities such as music performance, music composition and music education tend to elicit high levels of flow. The present study aims to review the latest findings associated to the link between music and flow and to show the importance of this optimal state in creating excellence in music.*

Key words: *flow state, music performance, music education, music composition*

1. Introduction

The cognitive, emotional and social features specific of academic music performance determine that, at least in certain situations, its quality is vulnerable to a series of psychological states experienced by the soloist before or at the time of performance. A growing body of literature (McPherson & Thompson, 1998; Juslin, 2003) highlights the fact that certain psychological attributes associated to the situation rather than the general features of the soloist, such as state of fatigue, focus of attention or performer's mood can speak decisively in regarding the artistic level of music performance pursued at a given moment.

Human experiences of everyday life are extremely varied, and the reasons that lead us to act in one way or another can become very complex. A separate category is defined by those situations in which people engage in activities that are sometimes difficult to achieve, where they make a sustained effort over a long period of time, apparently without being supported by a rewarding motivation. This is the case for people who invest a lot in expensive hobbies, musicians who spend thousands of hours studying their instrument or performance athletes who, after becoming champions, continue their training with the same intensity, pleasure and determination.

This is how a painter is described while carrying out his artistic activity: "As the painting took shape, the artist seemed to enter a trance-like state. The motivation to continue painting was so intense that fatigue, hunger or discomfort ceased to exist. Why is this man so caught up in what he's doing? The behaviorist explanation would suggest that the artist is motivated to paint because he was going to be financially rewarded for that painting. But I noticed that the painter, as soon as he saw his work

¹ Associate Professor PhD., "George Enescu" National University of Arts, Iași, România, email: dorinaiusca@yahoo.com

finished, almost immediately lost interest in it. As a rule, he turns it over and leans it against a wall. He didn't seem anxious to display it somewhere, nor to sell it. He just wanted to start the next one as soon as possible.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975 *apud* Dean, 2009, p. 4).

The image described above is strikingly similar to the following, in which a composer talks about the state he is in when he works best: “You are in such a state of ecstasy that you almost feel like you don't exist. I have experienced such moments many times. It's as if the hand is detached from my body and I have nothing to do with what is happening. I just sit and watch and wonder. Everything flows by itself.” (Goleman, 2005, p. 129).

Regarding this experience, in 1975 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi proposed a theory that universally explains the psychological state that occurs when people are completely absorbed in activities they care about, where they compete with themselves and in which the results seem to be obtained without effort. He named the psychological state to which he refers as “flow state”, a phenomenon that contributes to experiencing “optimal experiences” that illustrates the situation of being engaged in a situation that he defines as satisfying and which he undertakes for the benefits of the activity itself and not to pursue its secondary goals.

The flow state is a trance-like state, very different from normal life experiences, but accessible to everyone under certain circumstances. It is stimulating but not uncomfortable; it requires total involvement, but it does not exceed individual's capacities, as it's not overwhelming. In principle, the flow state seems to represent the best experience that people can encounter. The study of the flow state has lasted for more than 20 years and has been associated with different activities: music education (Bakker, 2005), business (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003), academia (Egbert, 2003), psychotherapy (Delle Fave & Massimini, 1992), drama (Martin & Cutler, 2002), occupational therapy (Emerson, 1998), sports (Jackson, 1992), web design (Johnson & Wiles, 2003), music performance (Wrigley, 2005; Pates *et al*, 2002; MacDonald *et al*, 2006; Fritz & Avsec, 2007).

The beginning of flow state research was carried out by Csikszentmihalyi by interviewing dozens of football players, hockey players, explorers, climbers, handball players, swimmers, chess players, composers and dancers. Using interview analysis, Csikszentmihalyi developed a theoretical model of the flow state to which he associated 6 characteristics (intense concentration, fusion of action and awareness, feeling of control, loss of notion of time, loss of self-awareness, autotelic experience) and 3 conditions (clear goals, balance between challenges and skills and immediate feedback (Dean, 2009).

Csikszentmihalyi has been associated with positive psychology, centered on the analysis of subjective experiences, individual traits and positive situations that lead to improving the quality of life and prevent appearance of pathologies that result from considering life experiences as trivial and meaningless (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). By developing the concept of flow, the researcher converges towards the idea that the state of happiness is not necessarily conditioned by external factors, but rather by our own mental attitude (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). In the 80s, the flow state research direction was integrated into the humanistic tradition developed by Maslow and Rogers (McAdams, 1990 *apud* Nakamura &

Csikszentmihalyi, 2002) or the literature centered on motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985 *apud* Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

Noting that people differ in their ability to experience the state of flow, in 1990 Csikszentmihalyi introduced the term “autotelic personality”. This describes people who tend to enjoy life to the fullest, engaging in activities that they do for pleasure and not due to external reasons. This type of personality is distinguished by a series of “meta-habits” (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002) such as: curiosity about various aspects of life, perseverance, low self-centeredness and the ability to be intrinsically motivated.

2. Flow state and music

One of the oldest and probably most frequently used function of music is getting into a certain desired psychological mood. Thus, in the culture of past or contemporary societies, musical styles and genres are associated with well-defined psycho-social contexts: the repertoire of academic music contributes to the affective, but especially cognitive enrichment of people, popular music manifests a strong cathartic character and so on. Moreover, folklore music clearly illustrates the specific functionality of each genre, differentiating between the “mourning”, “wedding”, “lullaby” songs and suggesting, from the beginning, the psychological state that the performer or the listener are expected to experience. Therefore, a direct correlation between music and flow state is to be expected, and the literature demonstrates that the directions in which this link is constructed are multiple.

One direction refers to the connection between flow state and music perception. There are studies (Lowis, 2002 *apud* Fritz & Avsec, 2007) that mention that listening to music is among the activities that very quickly induce flow state. Also, the experiment of Pates and colleagues (Pates *et al.*, 2002) conducted on netball players highlighted that the flow state experienced during playing game is stimulated by listening to their favorite music in the background. This phenomenon also improved the subjects’ sports performance, by triggering some emotions and cognitions associated with flow state.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) distinguishes between hearing music and listening to it, stating that the latter activity in particular is related to flow state, by enriching human life. In order to listen to music, we must first focus our attention on sound stimuli. The author specifies that some people even perform a series of rituals that precede musical listening, aiming to enhance the pleasure of listening: they adjust the intensity of the light, sit in their favorite armchair and so on. We can see these gestures in listening both to recorded music and to a live concert.

Moreover, in live concerts there are some clearly defined rules: an appropriate outfit, a specific attitude or a certain behavioral pattern are required. During a musical concert, due to the fact that individuals live the same experience together, process the same auditory information, think and feel relatively in the same way, what Emile Durkheim called “collective effervescence” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p.110) is reached, which creates a strong sense of belonging.

This state resulting from attending a live music event is, as Csikszentmihalyi states, very close to the state of flow. In this context, it is not only the sound stimuli that produce a strong impact, but also the pauses between the sounds enliven the

specific atmosphere. Csikszentmihalyi points out that the more a person develops his analytical ability to listen to a piece of music, the more likely he is to experience the state of flow through music perception.

Another example of connection between music and flow is provided by the activity of composing music. In this sense, a series of researches (Sheridan & Byrne, 2002 *apud* Fritz & Avsec, 2007; MacDonald *et al*, 2006) found a significant direct correlation between the level of flow state and the level of creativity in music. The study by MacDonald & colleagues (2006) asked a group of 45 students to solve a musical composition task, shortly after which the subjects were also measured for the flow state they experienced during the creative act. The musical fragments composed by the students were recorded, their quality level being later determined by a group of 24 specialists. The results showed that the subjects who experienced the flow state more intensely had more valuable compositions. In the same research context, the authors of the experiment discuss the ways of using the flow concept in music education.

Music education is also susceptible to the influence of flow state, as noted by Arnold Bakker (2005) in a study carried out on a large number of subjects (178 teachers and 605 students from 16 pre-university educational institutions). Analyzing the way in which they experience the state of flow in an educational context, Bakker observed that the professional resources available to instrument music teachers contribute to the emergence and maintenance of flow state, by balancing between professional challenges and teaching skills. Moreover, the level of flow state of teachers directly correlates with the level of flow state experienced by their students, a phenomenon explained by the researcher through the theory of emotional contagion (Hatfield, 1994 *apud* Bakker, 2005). The flow state is transmitted from teacher to student and increases with the improvement of school resources.

According to a Slovenian study (Fritz & Avsec, 2007), in the case of music academy students, experiencing flow state during musical educational activities (rehearsals, solo performance, performance with orchestral accompaniment) correlates significantly with subjective well-being, especially with its emotional aspects. The result is not surprising since, as the authors predict, the flow state is an affective rather than a cognitive experience.

Empirical analysis of the link between flow state and musical performance started with Kraus's research (2003 *apud* Wrigley, 2005) which investigated the experience of flow state during woodwind ensemble rehearsals, using a qualitative design that involved interviews, recordings, observations or written notes during rehearsals. The findings of the study highlighted the fact that flow state tends to occur in rehearsals that take place over a longer period of time and in which the instrumentalists perform without interruption.

3. Conclusions

There are a number of motivational or social factors that can have their say in the emergence of the flow state in musical performance. Susan O'Neill (1999) compared the level of flow state experienced during musical performance by three groups of students between the ages of 12 and 16: a group from a primary school

studying a musical instrument in private and two groups from a music school (one with high performing students in instrumental performance and another of students with an average level of musical performance). The results showed that the highest scores of flow state associated with instrumental training were reported by high performing students in the music school and by those in the general school. The educational perspective of the study draws attention to the level of intrinsic motivation of students with average results in musical performance.

In conclusion, musical performance illustrates a complex psychological context, in which experiencing the flow state can have significant implications on the quality of music performance.

References

1. Bakker, A.B., (2005), *Flow among Music Teachers and Their Students: The Crossover of Peak Experiences*, "Vocational Behavior", 66, 26-44
2. Csikszentmihalyi, M., (1975), *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
3. Csikszentmihalyi, M., (1990), *Flow. The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Harper Collins e-books
4. Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Hunter, J., (2003), *Happiness in Everyday Life: The Uses of Experience Sampling*, "Journal of Happiness Studies", 4 (2), 185-199
5. Dean, B., (2009), *Optimal Experience in Relationships, Activities and Beyond: Connecting Flow and Self-Expansion*, Doctoral Dissertation, Indiana State University, USA
6. Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M., (1985), *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behaviour*. New York: Plenum Press
7. Delle Fave, A., & Massimini, F., (1992), *The ESM and the Measurement of Clinical Change: A Case of Anxiety Disorder*. In M. De Vries (Ed.), *The experience of psychotherapy* (p. 280-289), New York: Cambridge University Press
8. Egbert, J., (2003), *A Study of Flow Theory in the Foreign Language Classroom*, "Modern Language Journal", 87 (4), 499-518
9. Emerson, H., (1998), *Flow and Occupation: A Review of Literature*, in "Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy", 65, 37-43
10. Fritz, B.S., Avsec, A., (2007), *The Experience of Flow and Subjective Well-Being of Music Students*, in "Horizons of Psychology", 16 (2), 5-17
11. Goleman, D., (2005), *Inteligența emoțională*, Pitești: Curtea Veche
12. Hatfield, E., Cacioppo, J. T., & Rapson, R. L., (1994), *Emotional Contagion*, New York: Cambridge University Press
13. Jackson, S. A., (1992), *Athletes in flow: A Qualitative Investigation of Flow States in Elite Figure Skaters*, in "Journal of Applied Sport Psychology", 4, 161-180
14. Johnson, D., & Wiles, J., (2003), *Effective Affective User Interface Design in Games*. In "Ergonomics", 46 (13-14), 1332-1345
15. Juslin, P. N., (2003), *Five Facets of Musical Expression: A Psychologist's Perspective on Music Performance*, in "Psychology of Music", 31(3), 273-302

16. Kraus, B. N., (2003), *Musicians in Flow: Optimal Experience in the Wind Ensemble Rehearsal*, in "Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities & Social Sciences", 64 (3-A), 839
17. Lowis, M., (2002), *Music as a Trigger for Peak Experiences among a College Staff Population*, in "Creativity Research Journal", 14 (3-4), 351-359
18. MacDonald, R., Byrne, C., Carlton, L., (2006), *Creativity and Flow in Musical Composition: An Empirical Investigation*, in "Psychology of Music", 34 (3), 292-306
19. McAdams, D.P., (1990), *The Person*, San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
20. McPherson, G. E., & Thompson, W. F., (1998), *Assessing Music Performance: Issues and Influences*, in "Research Studies in Music Education", 10, 12-24
21. Nakamura, J., Csikszentmihalyi, M., (2002), *The Concept of Flow*, in C.S. Snyder & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (p.p. 89-105), Oxford: Oxford University Press
22. O'Neill, S., (1999), *Flow Theory and the Development of Musical Performance Skills*, in "Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education", 141, 129-134
23. Pates, J., Karageorghis, C.I., Fryer, R., Maynard, I., (2002), *Effects of Asynchronous Music on Flow States and Shooting Performance among Netball Players*, in "Psychology of Sport and Exercise", 4 (4), 415-427
24. Seligman, M.E.P., Csikszentmihalyi, M., (2000), *Positive Psychology: An Introduction*, in "American Psychologist", 55 (1), 5-14
25. Sheridan, M. & Byrne, C., (2002), *Ebb and Flow of Assessment in Music*, *British Journal of Music Education*, 19 (2) 135-143
26. Wrigley, W. J., (2005), *Improving Music Performance Assessment*, Griffith University