

## **Static Energy, the Musician's Enemy**

Here's a concept I've been wrestling with for a while:

### ***static energy destroys music***

Music is Motion. Music is flow. It delineates TIME and describes the passage of time in a most miraculous way. Anything that disrupts flow is counter to our musical aims.

Air flows. Tone flows. Phrases flow. Movements flow. Dynamics flow.

Problems we encounter while making good "quality of motion" in our music are often the result of static energy. Here are a few examples:

- 1) When playing "loud" (I much prefer "strong" when I think Forte), do you ever feel the sound get strained, brittle, bright? Check the chest. I'll bet it's very rigid and still on the exhale; almost frozen in place.
- 2) Does your sound wobble when playing soft and high. Again, check the chest? Then check the lips.....rock hard, frozen, tensed.
- 3) Do you have difficulty playing fast lips slurs or a smooth, easy legato? Lips and jaw feel tight, I would guess.
- 4) Do you have difficulty making musical LINE happen? Think of the Mozart Requiem: Does it flow through notes or slot from note to note? Static. Vertical thinking. Note, then note, then note, then note, etc.

Physically and mentally, we must loosen the bonds and allow our bodies and minds to adapt to the flow of the music. The quality of our music is directly related to the quality of motion we invoke. We

cannot create good motion when the body and mind are locked, frozen, rigid, and stiff.

We can use the mind-body connection to our advantage. If we loosen the body, the mind will follow. But how? Here are some ideas for you:

1) Think in cycles. The universe operates in cycles. Time passes in cycles. Never ceasing, never pausing, always moving round and round. Climb aboard the cycles you sense in the music. Don't pause to dwell. Stay always with the moment, free to progress through time and move ahead. No static energy.

2) Breathe in cycles. Practice this every day before you play a single note. Breathe in. Easy. Steady. Feel the body expand, don't MAKE it expand. Then blow out. Easy. Steady. Feel the body contract, don't MAKE it contract. Over and over do this, sensing the easy cycle and easy flow. Expand, contract.....over and over. No static energy.

3) Practice "strong" playing every day. Sense the air bag filling up, then allow it to compress from every direction as the air flows through the buzzing lips. Don't just contract from the belly. Feel a SPHERE of air inside you and wrap you're entire body around that sphere as you blow. The only point of resistance is at the LIPS. Not in the throat, not in the tongue, not in the mind. Get the air forward in your mouth and feel it pass through the lips. Expand with the inhale, CONTRACT on the exhale. Don't lock the body in place with a stationary stance or stiff posture of any sort. Watch great performers: their bodies are free to move and they appear relaxed. That's because they ARE free to move and they ARE relaxed. No static energy.

4) When playing soft and high, take a tiny sip of air on the inhale. Air under pressure is STATIC air, until it finds a way to burst out of its shell. Static air is death to a brass player. So, if only a tiny amount of air will be passing through the lips, we don't need an enormous amount of air when playing soft and high, right? Too much air will cause a static back pressure and will be seeking a way to burst. This is not conducive to a good sound, no matter how many hours you spend trying to control it. Easy breath. Easy blow. And just as much strength in the embouchure as needed, no

more. "Strength" is static. Holding still and rigid, staying tight, is not going to produce a nice tone. Feeling malleable, gooey, and filled with flow will allow for good sounds. No static energy.

5) Practice lip slurs just a bit faster than you can do them cleanly. Use the metronome and stay just at the edge of control. Eventually, you should develop a sensation that the lips are very rubbery, very loose. Able to move on the rim, not locked in place. You want them always to feel this way. Through rubbery lips passes steady air flow. The air will support your sound, not the lips. The air must be moving, the lips must be moving. Everything must MOVE. No static energy anywhere in the body.

On a larger, more esoteric plane of thought, static energy is really every human beings enemy. Static energy is indicative of the fight-or-flight syndrome. Once a life preserver (when tigers were likely to eat us), it now can be a life disabler. This is seen often as stage-fright, by the way. An undue response to a perceived threat to life. At one time, a very handy response indeed, but perhaps not when we play, eh? If a tiger were about to eat you, tensing up and lashing out (or running away quickly) might be the best way to handle the situation. When you're about to play a Sonata, I don't believe the situation is quite so severe. In all but the most dire circumstances, we modern people don't need the fight-or-flight responses. It is an evolutionary leftover from a bygone era when life really was a difficult and dangerous proposition. We can appreciate that aspect of our heritage and lineage without allowing it to cripple our lives. An awareness of this condition, in fact, can serve the humanist in you and make your music that much more powerful to your listeners. Human beings can empathize, after all.

Music is a very powerful representation of life itself. Tension and release is all throughout our music. It derives from the earliest attempts to portray the hunt, the chase, and all other aspects of daily survival. Tension and release is the key to good phrasing, because good phrases must necessarily be representative. Otherwise, we don't communicate to our listeners. It's the moment of release after mounting tension that makes you sigh to Beethoven. It's growing stress and tension that makes you squirm

with Mahler. Shostakovich. Mozart. It's the way in which the masters control tension and its appeasement that makes them masterful.

But remember this: it is NOT tension in our bodies that will convey tension in the music. Tense music still has flow. Flow is anti-static. The tension is derived through motion. Find another way to introduce tension-release to your phrases other than locking up the body. Find a healthier, more free, more musical means to communicate. Great tone, great pitch, great shapes.....but stay loose, even as the music feels "tight" and "tense".

Be representative. Create good quality of motion. Avoid static.

## Achieve v. Receive, Serious v. Sincere

This article makes a number of assumptions from the outset. First, I make the assumption that your skill level, commitment, and passion are fully developed. (Or at least there's no doubt in your mind that you're giving this music thing ALL you've got to give.)

Given those assumptions, perhaps you've hit a wall. It happens. Some prefer to call it a plateau. Progress seems to be hurdling headlong, then a sudden lull, or calm. This can be disheartening. The normal response is to try harder. Push. Work. Get SERIOUS about what you're doing. I propose a different, in my mind healthier, tack.

Let us assume that the wall you've run into is not from a lack of practice. Rather, you are presently in the midst of the most fervent practicing era of your life. And you have perhaps run into a period of frustration, confusion, and even anger. It can arise from a number of sources. The pressure of winning a gig, finishing that degree, paying the bills, getting into that Grad School, feeding the kids, holding the gig. Boredom.

Stagnation. Lack of motivation.

It's a feeling you're bound to encounter if you're doing your very best. It needn't concern you, in fact, since it's truly a matter of course for those trying to achieve lofty goals.

Your brethren in the workaday world feel the same way. Often, in fact. Primarily those who care about and are quite good at what they do.

Despite that tidy logic, though, these feelings of frustration, stagnation, and doubt DO concern you. In fact, you're of the belief that they surely OUGHT to concern you. To feel otherwise would make you a *slacker* and surely would not bode well for your next audition. It is a dog eat dog world, after all, and we are competing with a very talented pool of musicians.

By sheer force of will and supplication, one can indeed *achieve* great things. You can work so very hard that any impediments to success are literally bowled over. A hard enough head banging against even a very hard wall will indeed make some progress. But you needn't bang your head so hard. For however great the accomplishments of those striving to *achieve*, greater still are the things that transpire for those willing to *receive*.

It may sound a bit like a New-Age diatribe at first glance, but I assure you this sensibility is anything but new. It smacks of a Zen philosophy, wherein we don't fight the current, but let the river sweep us along life's journey. It sounds like "*Let Go and Let God*", that phrase we often hear from our born again Christian friends. Maybe this is true. I suppose it depends on your perspective.

The present lull in your progress is most likely due to your perspective, too. The power of the mind is awesome indeed. Having the proper frame of mind can have an inestimable effect on the quality of our lives. Since our lives are committed to making music, it follows that the proper frame of mind can profoundly effect the quality of our music. I'll present one example, a poignant one. This is but one of countless examples of a human being attaining great heights despite himself; a deeply committed person who made a life-altering realization. It's an inspiring story for me, and I believe there's a lesson here for all of us.

Martin Luther was a man who took everything over the top. If he put his mind to something, NOTHING got between him and his stated goal. He was an exceptional example of a man with conviction, desire, and lofty goals. I suppose today's society

would label him a Type-A workaholic. His goal was not to bring down the very mighty Holy Roman Church, (at the time a power such as the world had never known). His goal was never so earthly.

His goal was to save his soul. A MUCH more daunting task, as he saw it.

In his quest for pure holiness, Luther spent years in the most unimaginable state of self-denial. Physical self-denial, that is. Deprivation. He, more than any in his midst, worked on technique. The technique was that of being an ascetic, an embodiment of spirit; a poster boy for the monastic lifestyle. His fellow monks apparently were frightened by his fervor. The level to which he had committed himself seemed un-human to most., and inhumane to nearly all.

To Luther, it was not ever bound to suffice. The end would not be attained, he eventually concluded, because it was indeed not attainable as he perceived it. That most certainly caused a very deep awareness of frustration. This state lasted many, many years for Luther. While he feverishly practiced a routine of self-denial, he was awash in a state of self-awareness. He believed that every aspect of his destiny was in his control. He hammered away at technique. Every day he grew more aware of himself and all of his shortcomings. This might sound a bit familiar.

Apparently, he took on a job as a teacher of Biblical texts. For the first time, HIS state was not his only concern. He now had others' to look after. Being a man of great conscience and integrity, he took his role of Spiritual Shepherd quite to heart. In so doing, a revelation occurred to him. An ear-splitting, Earth-shattering, ground-quaking revelation as he experienced it:

Salvation, as he was so desperately trying to achieve it, was NOT to be achieved.....it was to be *received* .

For Luther, an unworldly sense of relief must have swept him off his feet. It obviously struck him hard in the very core of his being. The rest of his life resoundingly attests to the greatness *achieved* from this revelation. As he no longer *tried* to attain the salvation of his soul, he came closer to actually doing it. As he became less aware and less critical of himself in the process of achieving salvation, he was well down the road to really doing it! *Achievement* was a fortunate by-product of the ability to *receive*. It was a gift. It was to be received like any other gift. His energies were then better spent on being the most receptive person he could be. He did not neglect the techniques he had come to master, but saw them in a wholly different context now. While it was prudent that he always be prepared for the onset of revelation (and thus achievement), he now understood that it was far beyond him to control such onsets. He was willing to admit that a power greater than he would see fit to provide his soul the nourishment it craved. He would just make sure he was ready. That is all one can do.

Is your musical career destined to lead you through such a labyrinth of self-discovery and spiritual awakening? Frankly, I don't know if a human being ever has or ever will have a journey such as Luther's. On our less lofty, but not less significant, plane of existence, though, I believe we can empathize with Luther on a number of levels.

First, we too are involved in a pursuit that demands perfection. Our ultimate aim is to make the best music possible, not necessarily save our souls. Nevertheless, if we are to reach our stated goals, it will require every ounce of our beings. In so doing, it is all too easy to become completely self aware. It is an easy trap to fall into when one starts to truly believe that our musical destiny is solely our responsibility and solely within our control. Since it's only us playing the horn, surely it's only us

that controls what comes out the bell, right? Not exactly.

Secondly, we are apt, like Luther, to develop a dogmatic reverence for technique; so much so that we can see no other aspects in our development as musicians. It is our technique that will set us apart from the competition come audition time. It is our technique that will earn the respect of our mentors and peers. It is our technique that makes us artists. Only technique will assure success, right? That depends on how you define success.

Luther believed this for a time. Then he changed his perspective and entered into the most fruitful days of his life. Less awareness of self, a receptive attitude, a reverence for powers larger than himself, but a ceaseless desire for truth led him to become an energized, fully alive, truly productive human being. What's more, he no longer had such a clearly defined aim as his original goal of salvation. He changed his perspective. His goal was now: truth, goodness, sincerity in his work. The very wonderful Bobby Shew uttered the following words and every day since, I have contemplated their profound meaning:

*Never do anything SERIOUSLY, but do everything SINCERELY.*

I paraphrase, Mr. Shew, and apologize if I got it wrong. But that was the gist of his message to a group of SERIOUSLY committed young musicians. We were all working so HARD. Completely aware of ourselves and our shortcomings. Incessantly beating ourselves up. Striving. Demanding. Never at peace. Convinced that our stated goals were worth achieving and the fact that we hadn't yet achieved them was entirely our doing. The fact that we one day would achieve them was also entirely our doing.

Within that tiny utterance from Mr. Shew, though, was an Earth-shattering revelation for me. As I dwelled more upon those words, I saw and felt the connotations of SERIOUS versus SINCERE. It occurred to me that SERIOUS was a word of self awareness. The onus was upon the individual. It connotes work, responsibility, inflexibility, impossibly high standards, an unattainable goal like Luther's. The gentle, forgiving, receptive nature of SINCERITY, though, seemingly lifts a weight from the individual. Its connotation is more humane. It allows one to be a conduit and gives one the courage to assign responsibility to a power greater than oneself. It creates a sense of peace. A tenderness. An allowance that doing the best one can do, free from BS, free from selfish motives, is the only way to make the journey. In a musical context, this made a lot of sense to me. I respected the art form and was willing to admit it was far greater than I.

This holds true for anyone pursuing their passion. It's not exclusive to musical endeavors. I began to realize this as I met more and more brilliant and compassionate teachers, doctors, lawyers, accountants, Mr. Moms, stay-at-home Moms, students. It lies in the passion. The peacefulness that arises when one knows oneself quite well and desires to make the world a little bit better each day. A deep level of SINCERITY in your daily deeds makes a better global impact than a somehow more selfish SERIOUSNESS about you. Every walk of life could see the reasoning there.

But if it's music that has captured your imagination and it's music that equals beauty in your mind, then you're apt to have moments of profound self-awareness and self-criticism. We keep it from becoming self-indulgence and lend it a peaceful air of sincerity by dwelling upon the beauty within all good music. A beauty that is greater than us and is offered us as a gift.

Always craving more, ever hearing more. That's how you want to live. ALL styles of music. Every means of audible expression man has ever known. Seeking, absorbing, and devouring an ever-growing palette of musical colors, gestures, innuendos, textures. Because we KNOW there is beauty within. Some brilliant thinkers have argued, and I would agree, that TRUTH lies within. An ideal state of the "world" lies within. An awareness of much more than ones physical situation lies

within; a glimpse of something MUCH larger than ourselves; and a power well beyond our means to harness it. This is a power that can make you a better person and give you a better quality of life. More compassionate, more patient, more deeply feeling, more aware (not of self....just *aware*). But this is a power that draws you nearer and feeds you such pure, honest, real sustenance that it simply requires that you return more and more often. Does this sound familiar? Are these thoughts and feelings you've had? On a very grand scale, this is what Luther sensed. His source wasn't music, but none (few?) would doubt its power. His imagination was gripped firmly. He was obsessed. He sought to receive the gift. He sincerely perfected his ability to receive. You should, too.

His revelation, then, served to free him of less productive modes of being and allowed him to venture closer to the source of this power. His mind left technique behind as it focused more on the *receiving* of inspiration and further revelation.

I suggest that your sense of frustration might arise from similar roots and might be squelched similarly. Let me explain:

There must come a point in your musical career when you begin to trust your technique and abide by it. You must forego the relentless assaults on it, criticisms of it, constant awareness of it, ceaseless dwelling upon it. Not for your own sake, but for the sake of the music. The music, after all, is your source of good food. You readily admit that it's a power greater than yourself. You have already accounted for the beauties it holds. You must now admit that it's a whole lot more than technique.

True enough: attaining the highest level of music-making will not allow for technical deficiencies of any nature. But is a technically flawless rendition in itself the highest level of music making? Think about that very carefully.

In your honest and sincere assessment, has technical perfection come to occupy your imagination as you listen to yourself? Others?

I hear you now saying:

*"It's a cop-out. I hear players of average ability saying this all the time: It's the MUSIC that matters, it's the MUSICAL affect, not right notes! Seems to me that's often because it's difficult for them to play the right notes. They haven't spent the time and/or displayed the level of commitment I have."*

I think you are right. I think that is indeed often the case, sadly, so your skepticism is appreciated. But I've also had the experience of hearing MASTERS of the art form uttering similar sentiments:

"It's the MUSIC that matters, it's the MUSICAL affect, not right notes!"

It just so happens that they utter this in the context of playing all the right notes.

So let's assume right notes, OK? That means, of course, that we assume impeccable technique, too. Perfect technique is right notes at the right time. Anything other than that has left the realm of technique. That's my whole point: get beyond your fixation on technique. There's so much more to dwell upon, ponder, and marvel at.

Allow your technique to achieve perfection *as a by-product* of your voracious appetite for musical colors, gestures, innuendos, textures. This will require a child-like curiosity (remember that?). This will require faith. It requires a belief in the good work you've done for so many years. It requires a belief in your coaches and teachers. All that you know to be true about making good sounds on this expandable tube *must* hold true for sure. You can have no doubt in your mind of that. You KNOW that the sounds you make fit well in a musical context. You believe that with the earnest fervor of Luther.

Now, you seek to know more thoroughly the musical context itself, not simply how your sound might fit into it. For the rest of your life, your technique will evolve to the degree to which your musical imagination demands. In other words, given the proper impetus, you will be as good as you need to be to express your musical thoughts. This holds true as long as your sincerity guides you. It follows, then, that your musical thoughts should be the object of your study. The validity of your musical thoughts might very well need more honing than your technique. If you are an accomplished player of even modest ability, I would venture that this is the case.

Can your musical soul bear the scrutiny of honest assessment? Are the motives behind your sound of the purest nature? Do they purport to express beauty? Are they quite sincerely rendered? Are your sounds evolving from a foundation of knowledge, a respect for the past, awe with the present, excitement at the future, denial of ego, and a commitment to truth? Do you play in declarative or interrogative terms? Who are you playing for and why? Are you showing respect for those you are playing *with*? What do you so desperately wish to *achieve* with your music and why the desperation?

A practice regiment designed to feed the imagination and a rich flavor of sincerity in your daily music making will assure that technique obeys your commands. It will be there when you need it. Your quest for musical truth will insist upon it. It's almost magical in that sense. The power of the mind/imagination is not to be overstated. Believe that.

Your desire to know as much as possible about your craft and your need to render music as sincerely as possible will find you working technique like never before. The difference will be you no longer do it from a sense of desperation, guilt, *payin' your dues*, or maintenance; you don't even do it with an awareness of *technique*. You will no longer feel like you HAVE to do it. You will arrive at a state whereby you MUST do it.....for your musical soul.

You work the subtleties and intricacies of your highly evolved craft with such utter servitude because the music demands it. It's not *technique*. That would trivialize it. It is your means to a terrific end: an end to which you've committed your entire being. It is your means to make yourself receptive to the gift. Like the sharpened tool of a devoted carver and the well-rehearsed swing of a PGA golfer..... merely a means to an end.

It is just happenstance that you will now realize more clearly why technique matters a LOT, even as you let it matter less. It matters now because it is the essence of sincerity in what you do. It is a conduit. It speaks to the truth. It's also a terrific happenstance that achievement happens despite yourself when it springs from a sincere source.

Now go get sincere about what you're doing. we can't wait to hear you!

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## Good versus Great

For those of you who aspire to become professional trombonists, this recent article may be of some interest. I posted it to a trombone discussion list and the response was overwhelmingly positive. Apparently, many of us need to be reminded about what it is that separates the very good players from the great players. This is what I observed:

I've had a strange week and some revelations have occurred. Normally, I might keep such revelations to myself (I hear you cheering), but a conversation with a good friend made me reconsider. Some things I've witnessed might be of value to some people....then again, some may wish to delete it:

In the span of 3 days, I've played with my beloved community brass band, done a 4-hour session in a network recording studio, and performed/rehearsed with a truly world-class symphony orchestra. I won't tell you which was most musically gratifying:-) And I certainly don't say this to brag. I say it because I've seen some eye-opening stuff. The players I've worked with this week have run the gamut, much like this list: from weekend warrior that works a 60-hour "real gig", to 6-figure symphonic specialist and everything in between (aspiring student, commercial stud, nothing-better-to-do voyeur, struggling freelancer.....) It's exciting really, to spend a week this way.

Most of my adult life, no ALL of it, has been a matter of me supporting myself by playing trombone. I simply could not afford to do a free community ensemble. I'm sure many of you know what I mean. Inevitably, you're gonna get called to do a pay gig the day of the community band's concert.....and you **MUST** take it. You gotta eat. This just builds resentment amongst your friends in the band and never really works to anyone's advantage. Or so I thought.....doing this Brass Band is simply one of the best musical experiences of my life. The rep is just too fun, the history and tradition of brass bands is fascinating and infectious, and you may never see an Eb horn again in your life!

If you're a gigger and think you cannot afford to do free gigs, I strongly encourage you to reconsider. The social bonds will only make you a better musician and the peripheral gigs might make it time well spent. And despite all that, it reminds you of why you do what you're doing in the first place! It's fun as heck. If you don't have a local brass band and can in no way afford to start one, (even if you hit up family members for a loan), there are equally compelling ensembles out there. Join a community orchestra or band, or trombone choir. Start one if you have to....friends would probably love to assist in getting your bone choir up and running. That was one revelation: join a group for the FUN of it, and disregard the pay. The second revelation (and I only had 2, promise) was this: SOUND and TIME are the elements that separate the great from the good.

There are folks in the community band that could give the symphony guys a run for their money when it comes to "chops". I've heard computer analysts with David Steinmeyer-like range and 4-star chefs with Dizzylike fingers. I've also seen symphony players get worked up over solos that the weekend warrior rips off in his sleep. It's a thin line of separation. BUT, the folks in the orchestra and the ones in the studio NEVER allow technique to interfere with their SOUND.

Everything they do is arrived at through the filter of SOUND. It is of primary concern at all times: high, low, loud, soft, fast, slow. Always with the best possible sound. I don't believe that all the folks in the brass band are incapable of doing this. Indeed, I know for a fact that many can. They simply DON'T; either by choice (doubtful) or by mere forgetfulness. Perhaps the technique is all-consuming and sound quality just doesn't find cranial space. But when reminded, they respond almost without exception. Perplexing and frustrating that can be. Very often, these players will gripe about so-and-so in town and "why do they get more gigs than me", etc. We've all been there. But sometimes I feel like telling them: "it's all about SOUND. Never forget that and you'll work plenty. But you must NEVER forget it. Not even for one gig, or even one piece, or phrase, or note. Never. Never ever. This what the great players are doing every time the horn hits the face. And you can do it, too. You just don't, or aren't, or have forgotten. Don't

forget!

Once that becomes your modus operandi, find the groove. Beethoven has a groove, Bernstein has a groove, Eric Ball has a groove, Bordogni, Basie oozes groove. Whole notes have groove, and scales, and isolated eighth-note hits. All musical events have groove, even silence. Find it and let it define everything: your dynamics, your articulation, your aggression, your intensity, your quiet.

Don't tap your foot (or at least don't rely upon it). That ain't the groove. If the foot taps itself, cool. It probably has the groove. But if the foot's tapping you, you are not finding the groove. The best part of this task is the fact that you can find the groove by surrendering yourself to it. You needn't, and probably shouldn't, work to find it. You should allow the groove to find you, then just hop inside and enjoy the ride. This is what the great players are doing. Even when these guys are warming up, I feel groove. And I hear good sound.

Weekend warriors, students listen up: you can do it just as well and just as easily. It's innate in every human willing to surrender to it. It has been my experience this week that the great players surrender and the others do not. They inexplicably often seem to FIGHT the groove. Again, I doubt very much whether this is by choice. We just sometimes forget, right? WRONG. You can't forget. Ever. Never ever (see above). The horn leaves the case and this happens: you get lost in your sound and let the groove come find you. You'll work plenty. And have fun.

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