

Adina Mornell: On Learning How to Practice So as to Make Performing Something We Can Enjoy, Rather Than Fear

Description

I was never a very diligent practicer, so I often went into performances with a pretty reasonable amount of doubt and uncertainty about how things were going to go. I wasn't happy about this, of course, but recognized that this was probably how I ought to feel, given my level of preparation.

So one year, I decided to get serious about practicing, and doubled my practice time.

I assumed that putting in the time would change how I felt before I went on stage. That I'd finally go into a concert feeling totally prepared. With a greater sense of certainty about how things would go.

So I was surprised when I still got the butterflies, and had all the same thoughts about wishing I could turn back time and give myself a few more weeks.

What's missing?!

It was both confusing and disappointing (I mean, I could have invested all of those extra hours into Mario Kart instead!). But it helped me realize that I wasn't going to get rid of that per-performance uncertainty by simply adding more practice hours. Evidently, something else was missing.

But what?

25 years ago, finding an answer to this question was a real challenge, as most of this type of information was hidden away in the stacks of university libraries. And even then, very little of this type of research was being done with musicians.

Fast forward to today, and there are more researchers out there with music backgrounds, asking great questions and finding intriguing answers. So today, I thought it'd be fun if we could talk to one such person.

Meet Adina Mornell

Adina Mornell has enjoyed a blended career as pianist, educator, and researcher. A fellow Oberlin graduate (go Yeobies!), you might recognize her name from the reference section of several previous blog posts, as she's done insightful work on effective practice and performance strategies specifically for musicians. She has been a visiting lecturer in places ranging from Los Angeles to Berlin to Vienna, and is currently a professor and chair of instrumental and vocal music education at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Munich, Germany.

In this episode, we'll explore...

- 2:16 – What musicians can learn about preparing for more reliable performances from aviation psychology
- 4:44 – Adina poses a question that ends up being one of the themes of our conversation. Specifically, what do we need to do in our preparation to be able to genuinely *enjoy* our time on stage?
- 6:21 – The challenge (and importance) of identifying what went *right* in your performance.
- 8:19 – A glaring omission in the research on stage fright. And the clarifying question we should all be asking ourselves in advance of performances.
- 10:08 – One of the first things we ought to do after a performance.
- 12:56 – Adina outlines the four components of stage fright – physiology, cognition, emotion, and behavior – and a few things we can do about each.
- 15:36 – Component #1 – physiological
- 18:50 – Component #2 – cognitive
- 22:14 – The tendency to think that our role as teachers is to find, erase, and prevent mistakes. But wouldn't it be nice if time and energy could also be devoted to teaching students how to enjoy music?
- 28:00 – Component #3 – emotional
- 34:25 – Component #4 – behavioral
- 42:07 – Adina shares details from a 2018 study which illustrates how difficult it can be to know if we are practicing effectively or not. And how some practice strategies give us the appearance of rapid improvement in the moment – but also lead to rapid forgetting, and gains that don't stick.
- 48:46 – Adina shares details from her 2019 collaboration with Gabriele Wulf (whose research on optimal focus and attention for learning/performance has also come up a number of times here on the blog – like [here](#) and [here](#)). Specifically with regards to what we should be focusing on when we're performing.
- 58:21 – Is any of this possible without recording? Or is recording an unavoidable necessity? Adina shares her thoughts.

Notes

We allude to a couple different studies along the way. [Here is a link](#) to the 2018 study (Evaluating practice strategies, behavior and learning progress in elite performers: An exploratory study) that came up at 40:56.

And [here's a link](#) to the 2019 study (Adopting an External Focus of Attention Enhances Musical Performance) that came up at 47:35.

An upcoming conference!

Adina organizes a multidisciplinary international symposium – [Art in Motion](#) – where every two years, researchers, educators, and practitioners in sport, dance, and music gather to share their perspectives and insights on topics related to performance excellence.

If you've been looking for an excuse to visit Munich, Germany (either in-person or virtually), mark your calendars – the next one will take place on June 2 & 3, 2023, and the theme is **motivation!**

[Art in Motion 2023](#)

Date Created

March 2022