

## Does Focusing on Musical Expressiveness in Performance Come at the Expense of Technical Precision?

### Description

It's been said that "There are no shortcuts to any place worth going."<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, there are few (if any) quick fixes in the practice room. No [one weird trick](#)-type effortless "solutions" that can completely eliminate our intonation challenges or give us impeccable rhythm.

So when we stumble across something that *does* legitimately lead to an immediate improvement in our playing, it can be a pretty cool moment.

In last week's post, we explored a mental focus hack in which trained singers immediately sang with a more beautiful sound when they made a tiny adjustment to their focus when singing. Where focusing more on filling a hall with sound, led to more "ring" and a better quality of sound overall, than focusing on the internal mechanics of vocal technique (you can read that [here](#) if you missed it).

But there were some lingering questions that went beyond the scope of that study. Like, would this work with instrumentalists too? Is this kind of focus sustainable beyond a few seconds? And perhaps most importantly, how would this kind of focus affect *technical* accuracy? Would it help? Hurt? Or have no effect at all?

### 3 performances

A recent study ([Mornell & Wulf, 2018](#)) looked at the effect of different types of performance focus in 23 musicians who were majoring in music performance or pedagogy at an Austrian university. On average, each musician had 14.5 years of experience on their instrument – including guitar, piano, strings, brass, woodwind, voice – and two accordion players ([cool!](#)).

Each musician was asked to select a short (~3min) piece or excerpt of a piece to play, that was memorized and performance-ready. Like the exposition of a Beethoven piano sonata, part of Bach's Chaconne for solo violin, etc.

After taking a moment to tune, musicians were led to a "performance room," where a camera and microphone were set up to record the performance, and two audience members sat waiting.

No instructions were given for the first performance of their piece/excerpt.

But after completing this first performance, they were asked to perform the same thing a second time – but this time, half of the musicians were instructed to "focus on the precision of their finger movements (or

lip movements for singers) and correct notes” (the **internal** condition). While the other half were instructed to perform while focusing on “playing for the audience and the expressive sound of the music” (the **external** condition).

Then, the conditions flipped, and everyone performed the same thing a third and final time.

## Rating the performances

Two expert raters (guitar and piano professors at the university, who had performance careers of their own, and years of experience judging competitions) then reviewed and evaluated the videotaped performances. To keep things totally fair, the raters were told nothing about the instructions the musicians were given, and the performances were also presented in random order to each rater.

And how were the performances rated, exactly?

Each performance was rated on both a) technical precision and b) musical expression, using a 1 to 9 scale (where 1 = unsatisfactory and 9 = excellent).

The judges were also asked to rank each musician’s three performances, regarding both technical precision and musical expression, where 1 was their best performance of the three, and 3 was their worst.

There was fairly good agreement between the judges in their rankings, with about 78% agreement on technical precision, and 85% agreement in terms of musical expression.

So which type of focus led to the best performances?

## Which performance was best?

As you can probably guess, focusing on “playing for the audience and the expressive sound of the music” led to higher ratings in musical expression, than focusing on playing the correct notes.

But would the increased musicality that comes from this kind of focus have a cost? Perhaps a slightly sloppier, or less technically precise performance?

Well...actually, no!

In terms of technical precision, there was **no** significant difference between the groups. Meaning, focusing on notes and technical precision didn’t lead to any greater accuracy in their performance than focusing on expression did. Essentially resulting in a performance that’s no cleaner – but a little more boring.

Actually, if anything, the external focus on expressive sound led to more technically accurate playing than focusing on technique did, as the highest accuracy scores occurred in the external focus condition (6.59 for external focus vs 6.07 for internal focus vs. 6.15 for the control condition).

These differences weren't statistically significant, but the researchers ran a follow-up study, with a few adjustments to add some additional rigor to the study design<sup>2</sup>, and in this study, the external focus instructions *did* lead to statistically significant increases in the technical accuracy scores as well as the musical expressiveness scores.

## Take action

Keep in mind that these were experienced musicians, playing pieces that were memorized, and performance-ready.

If one were sight-reading, for instance, it might be a different story. I mean, it's hard enough to track the notes flying by on the page when reading something unfamiliar. Focusing on expressive sound or playing to the audience in that moment might be too distracting.

Or if you're still in the early stages of working on a piece, that isn't yet in "muscle memory," I'd imagine that focusing more on fingers and note accuracy might actually be helpful – at least at certain stages of the learning process.

So where does your focus go in performance? I don't know if attention control is something we spend much time exploring in any systematic kind of way, but I found this to be pretty transformational in my experience of performing. And kind of fun to play around with too. So next chance you get, say in a studio class, or low-key performance of some kind, maybe this is something you can experiment with?

In the first half of a piece, for instance, you could try focusing on musical expression. And in the second half, you could focus on technical precision. Be sure to videotape your performance too, so that afterwards, you can review the recording to see how different things look and sound when you compare the halves. (Hint: You might pay attention to how each experience *feels* too – I'm pretty sure you'll find one type of focus to be much more engaging and enjoyable than the other!)

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## References

Mornell, A., & Wulf, G. (2018). Adopting an External Focus of Attention Enhances Musical Performance. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 66(4), 375-391.

## Date Created

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