

Erik Ralske: On Developing a Stronger Rhythmic Pulse, and the Paradoxical Benefits of Giving Yourself Permission to Miss Notes

Description

When I was growing up, I always thought learning music followed a pretty simple, logical, linear path.

Learn the notes. Play those notes in tune. With a pretty sound. Add dynamics, articulation, make sure I'm honoring the Italian words, and that everything sounds "musical."

Or in other words, accuracy first, musicality second.

I was also severely allergic to metronomes. And I rationalized my avoidance by telling myself that subdividing was a sure-fire way to sound more robotic and less musically compelling.

It also seemed to me that if I was having technical issues with a passage, the easiest way to solve that would be to do less – i.e. less vibrato, rubato, dynamic contrast, etc. At least in the short term, until I could resolve whatever technical shortcomings I was running up against.

Of course, as the years went by, I began to learn that the technical and musical aspects of playing are **much** more intertwined than I realized. To the degree that in some, if not many cases, playing more musically, can actually make it easier to play more accurately. And that thinking of technique and music separately, not only makes practicing less fun, but can slow down the learning process too.

Meet Erik Ralske

Erik Ralske has played Principal Horn in the Met Opera orchestra since 2010, following 17 years in the NY Philharmonic. He is also on the faculty of The Juilliard School and Aspen Music Festival.

In this 40-min episode, we'll explore:

- How learning a passage at performance tempo *from Day 1*, can sometimes be better than working it up with with a metronome from slow to fast (6:11)
- What Erik means when he said that sometimes the solution to a technical problem is not technical, but musical (9:36)
- How giving himself permission to miss notes in auditions paradoxically helped him play more accurately and consistently (12:00)
- I ask Erik how he works on rhythm, and he describes two "attitudes" when it comes to working with a metronome – a passive approach (bad) and an active approach (good) (15:16)
- Erik explains how these same attitudes can affect ensemble performance too – and how conductors can be an easy target for ensemble issues (20:01)

- How subdividing helps Erik to play not just with more trust and courage on days when he isn't feeling as bold or confident in his playing, but get into "the zone" as well (22:32)

Notes

[1] I reference Erik's having been offered the principal position at LA and with the Met in the same week – here's more about that from the NY Times: [Pit vs. Stage: Longer Nights and More Rubato](#) (1:58)

[2] Erik alludes to how wind players, and horn players in particular "hang by a very fragile thread in terms of hitting the right note." There's an interesting Quora discussion about why this is – with a great graphic near the bottom that illustrates what playing the piano would be like, if the keyboard were rearranged to represent where a horn's pitches are: [Why does everyone say the French horn is hard to learn and master?](#) (10:53)

[3] If you want to hear the entirety of the horn solo from Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony, here's a link to the 2nd movement (Karajan, Berlin, 1971) – the horn solo begins about a half a minute in: [Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 5 \(Karajan, Berlin, 1971\)](#) (26:20)

[4] Subdividing as a tool for greater rhythmic integrity, technical accuracy, and more musical playing has come up with artists in previous episodes too:

- [Julie Landsman: On Getting into the Zone and Developing Trust in Your Playing](#)
- [Catherine Cho: On Developing Great Rhythm \(and Why Old-School Metronomes Are the Way to Go\)](#)

More interviews with Erik

Here's another written interview where Erik describes some of the differences between a symphonic job and opera job. Like the need for a "cast-iron bladder."

- [Interview of the Month: Erik Ralske @International Horn Society](#)

Erik is also featured on one of [Sarah Willis'](#) (Berlin Philharmonic) live [Horn Hangouts](#):

- [Erik Ralske live on Sarah's Horn Hangouts](#)

Study with Erik

@[Juilliard](#) or @[Aspen Music Festival](#)

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