

Evidence That You're Probably Not Great at Performing and Critiquing Your Performance at the Same Time

Description

Like most kids growing up in the *Back to the Future* era, I went through several jean jackets (and ["life preservers"](#)) during my childhood. But there was one in particular – a green acid-washed one – that I thought was pretty darn cool.

Of course, looking back at photos, it's pretty cringy, and makes me wonder what I could possibly have been thinking...

Which I suppose speaks to the discrepancy that can exist between our perception of how something feels in the moment, and what it looks (or sounds) like when viewed from a third-person perspective after some time has passed.

The same sort of thing would often happen when I was putting together an audition tape too. I can remember a couple occasions where I left the recording session feeling pretty good, thinking there was one take in particular that was going to work. But then, when listening back a couple days later, being unable to find that take – realizing that the great take I thought I had didn't exist, and that things didn't sound nearly as good as I thought they did in the moment.

Being able to accurately evaluate our own playing is essential for making the most of our practice time. But how accurate are we? And how does our self-evaluation change after listening to a recording of the performance, and letting a bit of time pass?

Perform, and evaluate

A pair of researchers ([Silveira & Gavin, 2015](#)) recruited 112 eighth-grade band students to perform an excerpt from a familiar piece that they had all previously performed¹

Each participant's performance of this excerpt was recorded, after which they were asked to rate their performance in four areas – a) tone quality, b) intonation, c) rhythm, and d) dynamics on a 1-7 scale (1="not good at all"; 7="very good").

After completing this self-assessment, they listened to a recording of their performance, and re-evaluated their playing, based on what they heard in the recording.

Two days later, they were asked to listen to the recording once again, and complete yet another self-assessment of what they heard.

The question being – would their evaluation of their playing be pretty consistent across all three times? Or would hearing a recording of their performance, as well as the passage of time, lead to any meaningful changes in how well or poorly they thought they played?

Changes over time

The short answer is yes, these things would make a difference.

How so?

Well, essentially, their ratings were highest right after playing, and only went down from there. Suggesting that their initial impressions may have been a bit inflated, and listening to a recording, plus a bit of time, led to a more critical (and perhaps accurate) assessment of their playing.

For instance, there was a statistically significant difference between the **pitch** and **rhythmic accuracy** ratings they gave themselves right after performing, and the ratings they gave themselves after listening back to their recording.

And when they listened to their performance once again two days later, there was a statistically significant drop not just in pitch and rhythmic accuracy, but in **tone quality** as well.

So what does this all mean in practical terms?

Takeaways

Well, the first thing to note is that the participants in this study had only been playing their instrument for a couple years. So in this case, the students started off thinking that they played pretty well, and realized after listening to the recording, that they may not have played quite as well as they thought at first. But it's possible that with more experienced musicians, things might go the other way. Where the musicians' initial impressions of their performance could be more negative, and become more positive as they listen back to the recording a couple days later and realize that it wasn't as bad as it may have felt in the moment.

Either way, for me, the main takeaway is that sure, we can probably give ourselves a performance evaluation that's in the ballpark without the benefit of a recording, but we're going to have a more accurate sense of how we played with a recording than without. And that essentially, it's kind of difficult for us to be both the performer and the critic at the same time (which other studies of this sort have also found).

So however it is that you feel right after a performance, maybe it's not necessary to dwell so much on how you think things went (other than perhaps to do a quick brain dump of all the things that you would otherwise keep obsessing about), but give yourself a pat on the back for all the work you put into preparing for it, celebrate a bit with some homemade [DoubleTree Chocolate Chip Cookies](#), and wait a day or two to before listening to the recording, to figure out what the next steps might be.

References

Silveira, J. M., & Gavin, R. (2015). The effect of audio recording and playback on self-assessment among middle school instrumental music students. *Psychology of Music, 44* (4), 880–892. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735615596375>

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