

How to Keep Performances of the Same Piece from Getting Stale

Description

Earlier this year, I stumbled across a restaurant which serves the best chicken tikka masala ever. It was so good, that one day, I ate it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Of course, I quickly ruined things by eating it so frequently that it ceased to be the magical concoction of chicken and spices it started out as, and slowly turned into blah. Chunks of blah, garnished with julienned blah and finely chopped blah, in a sauce of blah.

We've all experienced something like this in our lives. Whether it's your new all-electric car, [buckwheat-filled wonder pillow](#), or piece you've started working on, at some point, everything loses the fresh, shiny luster of newness, and starts trending towards blahness.

Nobody wants to give a stale, uninspired performance of course. But when we have to perform the same piece over and over again, how can we keep things new and fresh so that we don't bore the audience (or ourselves) to tears?

More engaged musicians

A trio of researchers (including conductor [Timothy Russell](#)) ran a [study](#) to see if a more mindful approach to performance would be a) more engaging and enjoyable to the musicians, and b) preferable (and noticeable) to listeners as well.

To test their hypothesis, they recruited 60 members of a college orchestra to perform the finale from Brahms's Symphony No. 1 two times.

The first time, the conductor gave the orchestra the following instructions: "Think about the finest performance of this piece that you can remember, and play it that way."

This was the control condition – where musicians were given an aspirational and presumably motivational goal, but a comparatively passive goal, geared more towards *recreating* a performance than creating it anew in the moment.

Before the second performance (the experimental condition), the musicians were instructed to "Play this piece in the finest manner you can, offering subtle new nuances to your performance." The idea with these instructions was to get the musicians to be more present and mindful, to think more creatively and spontaneously in the moment, and be more improvisational in their performance.

To gauge the impact of these two sets of instructions on the performers' level of engagement, the

musicians were asked to rate their enjoyment of the performance after each run-through.

Not surprisingly, musicians rated the more mindful, improvisational performance as being more enjoyable. The results suggest that being more actively involved in creating something new is more engaging than striving to recreate something from the past.

Audience preferences

To see if there was a meaningful and discernible difference between the two versions of the finale from the listener's perspective, the researchers played back the two recordings for an audience of 143 community choir members.

Lo and behold, a significant majority of the audience members (88%) expressed a preference for one recording over the other – suggesting that there was indeed a discernible difference between the two performances.

But would they prefer the “standard” version, or the more creative improvisational version?

Some listeners did prefer the “standard” version, but a significant majority (83%) preferred the more dynamic, improvisational performance.

Wait a minute...

You might be thinking that this is all well and good, but isn't a performance often better the second time through?

To make sure these results weren't due to the “it's-always-better-the-second-time” phenomenon (a.k.a. “practice effects”), the researchers conducted a follow-up study with a few design tweaks to make sure this wasn't the reason why the audience preferred take #2.

For the most part, the results were the same. As in the first study, the musicians enjoyed the mindful, improvisatory style of playing more. And once again, the majority of the audience members preferred the mindful version too.

Take action

Next time you have an opportunity to perform, try the mindful approach. See what happens when rather than trying to replicate a great performance, you shift your focus to creating cool moments and highlighting new nuances as you play.

Aside from being more appealing to the listener, you might find that this makes performing more fun and engaging for you, and also leaves you too busy to worry and get all anxious about the things that could go

wrong.

A contest – enter to win and be the first to try the new Practice+ app!

The creators of the popular metronome app Metronome+ are working on a bigger and better new app for musicians called [Practice+](#). In addition to a metronome, it includes a tuner function, recording and sharing capabilities, and more.

The app is still in private beta, but I have an invite to give away to one lucky reader. To enter the contest, leave a comment below with a technique or strategy you have used (or a relevant anecdote) to stay engaged and keep performances from getting stale in your own performing experience.

The contest ends Wednesday at midnight, so share your strategy or anecdote today before you forget!

Update: Congratulations to contest winner David Vaughn, who will be getting first crack at the new app [Practice+](#). Thank you all for your great ideas on how to stay engaged in performances! Your suggestions will be a great resource for folks searching for ways to keep things fresh!

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