

Kristian Steenstrup: On Singing, Solfège, and Cultivating a More Efficient Approach to Learning New Music.

Description

I have to confess that when I was in school, ear training classes were always a bit of a mystery to me. Something I grudgingly tolerated (or tried to get out of!), rather than embraced.

I mean, sure, I got that the sight-singing, dictation, and rhythm exercises we did were all intended to help develop my musicianship in some way. But I wasn't really sure what "musicianship" meant exactly. And I didn't quite see how any of this was going to help me produce a better sound in my Beethoven sonata or take my Paganini Caprice to the next level either.

So why is it that completing a sequence of ear training classes is a pretty standard requirement in most music schools? Does any of this have a tangible, measurable impact on our playing?

A study!

A recent study out of Denmark might help to shed some light on this question ([Steenstrup et al., 2021](#)), as it compared the effect of regular physical practice, mental imagery, and singing/solfège on learning new music among 50 college-level music students.

The findings were intriguing, so I thought it might be fun to talk to the lead author and spend a little time digging into the details to find out what they learned.

Meet Kristian Steenstrup

Trumpet player Kristian Steenstrup has been a professor at The Royal Academy of Music in Aarhus, Denmark since 2000, and is the author of two books on brass playing – [Teaching Brass \(2007\)](#) and [Blow Your Mind \(2016\)](#) – where he combines the principles of "song and wind" that he learned from legendary brass pedagogue Arnold Jacobs with recent research from the field of motor learning.

In this episode we'll explore...

- 2:26 – What was the gist of Arnold Jacobs' approach to brass playing? And how did this change Kristian's playing?
- 6:52 – A short discussion of internal vs. external focuses of attention, how this ought to be different in practice vs. performance, and how Gabriele Wulf's research in this area may apply to musicians.
- 11:43 – Kristian explains why playing by feel can be more challenging for wind players than other instrumentalists.

- 14:51 – How Jacobs’ pedagogy ties into the Inner Game of Tennis.
- 16:44 – What sort of sound should we audiate internally? A vocal sound? Instrumental sound?
- 19:06 – How can we cultivate a clearer concept of sound?
- 22:19 – Kristian provides an overview of his recent study of 50 trumpet players, and describes some of the key findings.
- 26:09 – I pick out the three things that I found most interesting about the study.
- 31:08 – We chat about the interesting difference between the participants who regularly engaged in random practice and those who didn’t.
- 34:10 – Kristian describes his four-step process for learning music more efficiently that combines many of the strategies used in the study.

Notes

- 2:26 – We start off the episode talking about Arnold Jacobs. You can learn more about Jacobs at the site below, which includes links to video clips, books, and many other resources: [Arnold Jacobs @WindSong Press](#)
- 8:37 – We mention Gabriele Wulf, and her research on the optimal focus of attention for learning and performance. You can learn more about her research [here](#). Her work has come up in posts or podcast episodes here on the blog a number of times – for instance, [here’s one study](#) that was done specifically with musicians.

More Kristian

If you’d like to do a deeper dive, you can download the complete paper that Kristian and his colleagues authored here:

- [Imagine, Sing, Play – Combined Mental, Vocal and Physical Practice Improves Musical Performance](#)

And if you’d like to check out Kristian’s books, both are now available in Kindle format here:

- [Blow Your Mind \(2016\)](#)
- [Teaching Brass \(2007\)](#)

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