

# In the zone: An autoethnographic study exploring the links between flow and mindfulness for a piano accompanist

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## Abstract

Flow is a phenomenon that describes those best moments in our lives when we feel in control of our actions and experience a deep sense of exhilaration and enjoyment that becomes a landmark in memory for what life should be like. First defined by the American psychologist Csikszentmihalyi in the early 1970s, flow is described as a phenomenon with seven distinct characteristics and, as part of a broader autoethnographic study of the phenomenon of flow as experienced by a piano accompanist, this paper explores the links between one of these characteristics—focused attention—with one of the concepts related to flow—mindfulness. Using an autoethnographic approach, this study teases out the complex nature of the music performance from a personal perspective. Autoethnography is a process where authors use their own experiences in their culture to look more deeply at what they term ‘self’ and ‘self-other’ interactions. In these contexts, autoethnography, as a way of studying the self and connecting the personal to the cultural and social provides a framework for critical self-reflection for me to examine my own performance practice. Through the use of an autoethnographic narrative I aim to shed light on how focused attention and mindfulness are experienced in collaborative music performance by a piano accompanist.

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## Introduction: The concept of flow

Flow is a “state of joy, creativity and total involvement with life” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 213), that can be experienced when individuals are totally absorbed in a challenging activity. The term ‘flow’ was first defined in the early 1970s by the American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. His earliest work focused on the phenomenon of optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), which he described as those best moments in our lives when we feel in control of our actions and experience a deep sense of exhilaration and enjoyment that becomes a landmark in memory for what life should be like. Jackson and Eklund (2002) have described flow as a psychological state that “represents those moments when everything comes together for the performer; it is often associated with high levels of performance and a very positive human experience” (Jackson, & Eklund,

2002, p. 133). These optimally positive experiences/moments in our lives are not those associated with mere pleasure-seeking behaviours but “usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 70).

Flow is of great interest to educators, including self-educators such as musicians, as Csikszentmihalyi suggests that by achieving control over the contents of our consciousness, we are able to change the very ordinary times of our lives into opportunities for personal growth. An experience of flow encourages participants to engage in that activity without any need for an extrinsic reward or future benefit, but simply because doing the activity is its own reward. “The combination of all these elements causes a sense of deep enjoyment that is so rewarding people feel that expending a great deal of energy is worthwhile simply to be able to feel it” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 49). Somewhat surprisingly, participants all reported the phenomenon of the experience in similar ways whether the enjoyable activity was physical or something more sedentary.

Research undertaken by Csikszentmihalyi in the 1970s indicated that when participants described an intensely enjoyable activity, they mention at least one of nine major components for this activity: a challenging activity requiring specific skills, a merging of action and awareness, clear goals, immediate feedback, focused attention, a sense of personal control over actions, a loss of self-consciousness, the transformation of time and an ‘autotelic’ experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). As a whole, these elements represent the optimal experience now known as flow (Jackson, Martin, & Eklund, 2008).

## The research design

Csikszentmihalyi’s early work (1975) used both quantitative and qualitative methodologies and many of the subsequent studies into the flow experiences of individuals and groups of people have continued to use both quantitative and qualitative research designs. There have been a number of studies into collaborative music performance for piano accompanists (Katz, 2009; Kokotsaki, 2007; White, 2010) but none have looked particularly at the phenomenon of flow from a personal perspective using a methodology such as autoethnography. The subjective nature of flow lends itself to a method of inquiry such as autoethnography where authors use their own experiences in their culture to look more deeply at self and self-other interactions (Chang, 2008). I am using the methodology of autoethnography (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000) in a major study which aims to explore more fully the characteristics of the phenomenon of flow especially when performing as a piano accompanist. Csikszentmihalyi’s definition of the flow phenomenon describes an experience with seven distinct characteristics and this paper explores the links between one of these characteristics—focused attention—with one of the concepts related to flow—mindfulness (Langer, 1989; Wright, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006).

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre that connects the personal to the cultural, social and political (Bartleet, & Ellis, 2009) and is very appropriate methodologically for examining flow as it opens the door on what is an inner experience that then enables an intimate and in depth investigation. Writing autoethnographically in the first person also allows me to reflect on the experience of flow from this intimate viewpoint. Building on Ellis’ methodological novel (2004) where she provides many exemplars of autoethnography, Bartleet and Ellis (2009), moreover, assert that autoethnography is especially useful for musicians as

it can expand musicians' awareness of their practice, values and beliefs. Music studies using autoethnography also allow researchers to contextualise their experiences alongside those of other musical colleagues. In this way, "autoethnography can allow musicians to explore their own creative practice in culturally insightful ways" (Bartleet, & Ellis, 2009, p. 6) and "inspire others to critically reflect upon their music experiences in relation to the autoethnographic tale being told" (Bartleet, & Ellis, 2009, p. 9). In describing methodological framework of autoethnography, Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 737) state "by exploring a particular life, I hope to understand a way of life," thus contextualising the place of autoethnography in the field of qualitative research.

## The data analysis

The data for the entire autoethnography consists of a detailed autobiographical account of my forty years of work as a piano accompanist and makes use of narrative *vignette*—short storied texts (Humphreys, 2005)—in terms of my experiences of the flow phenomenon. The data was then analysed to build a theory for understanding the flow phenomenon for a piano accompanist. Theory can fall into a number of different categories including descriptive, explanatory, predictive or propositional (Fawcett, & Downs, 1992), but research of this nature falls into the notion of what Gregor (2002) has termed "theory for understanding." Gregor (2002, p. 7) describes this as theory that "explains 'how' and 'why' something occurred." Duncan (2004) also acknowledges that autoethnographic studies are most suited to creating theories rather than testing them, allowing the researcher to explore and develop theory for the improvement of practice. Adding further depth to this understanding, George and Bennett (2004, p. 115) argue that case study methodologies—and autoethnography is by definition a case study of the self (Gergen, & Gergen, 1997)—can be appropriate for theory development and further suggest that "when theories are well developed, researchers can use case studies for theory testing." Kidd and Finlayson (2009, p. 986) agree, suggesting that this process "helps me to be clear that what I am doing is interpreting meaning from the stories, from my own place in the world." They suggest that theory can be built from motifs that "evoke, resonate, and illuminate meaning, leading the way to a deeper interpretation, theorizing, and a search for solutions that are based in one researcher's unique, partial, and multiple understandings" (Kidd, & Finlayson, 2009, p. 993).

This paper considers one of the motifs of the piano accompanist experience, concentration, and considers how this can lead to further understanding of the particular characteristic of flow described as focused attention, and its links to the concept of mindfulness within the practice of a piano accompanist.

## Discussion

### ***Focused attention, concentration and flow***

One of the most commonly reported characteristics of flow is that which pertains to concentration or focus of attention (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Activities that are intensely enjoyable often require a complete focussing of attention on the task itself, leaving no room in the mind for any distracting thoughts. The sense of fulfilment that comes from engaging in an activity with a sustained level of concentration and focused attention allows participants to experience the positive phenomenon of flow. An excerpt from my accompaniment journal reports my

experience of focussed attention during a performance of the duet *Bess, You is My Woman* from the opera *Porgy and Bess* by George and Ira Gershwin and DuBose Heyward:

They did the duet from *Porgy and Bess*—‘*Bess, you is my woman*’—I was playing—it was a FANTASTIC performance! We’d had one rehearsal and then a performance, and it was spine-tingling, and there were times when they were just pulling the music about and I could follow exactly what they were doing—stretching it to the absolute—pushing and pulling with the tension of the music—it was just exhilarating! (Personal journal, February 2009).

In this case, not only is the focused attention contributing to a development of a flexible performance where the accompanist is able to respond to the performance signals of the soloists, it is providing me with an experience of intense enjoyment. The narrative provides an account of a performance where all the elements of the music, its emotion, the nuance of the phrase and the technical ability of the performers all come together in one seamless performance. I recount another example of this phenomenon while accompanying a vocal duet of songs from *West Side Story* by Bernstein and Sondheim:

I also felt a similar experience when I was accompanying in a recital performance of songs *West Side Story*—that was a few years ago—we did some songs from *West Side Story* and again the combination of just fantastic music—because the music itself is just brilliant—and the combination of performers who really understood the music, and who gave great signals that I could follow, provided a great sense of cohesion (Personal journal, February 2009).

Focused attention seems to bring a heightened sense of the reality to the task at hand so that all other distracting elements—including personal comfort, fatigue, everyday worries and concerns—get pushed aside in one’s thoughts during the time of the activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Tellegen and Atkinson (1974, p. 274) refer to this focused attention as absorption and suggest “absorbed attention is highly ‘centered’ (in a roughly Piagetian sense) and amplifies greatly the experience of one part of reality, while other aspects recede from awareness.” While their study is dealing with openness to absorbing and self-altering experiences as a trait relating to hypnotic susceptibility, it does provide useful data on the experience of focused attention and concentration. They report that “the absorbed individual often seems not to notice external events that would normally draw attention” (Tellegen, & Atkinson, 1974, p. 274). Furthermore, they suggest this trait has a “cognitive aspect that involves the empathetic quality and versatility of the representations of high-Absorption [sic] persons” and this may be an “important ingredient of creativity, particularly image-oriented, artistic creativity” (Tellegen, & Atkinson, 1974, p. 275).

This concept of highly absorbed individuals displaying a high level of empathy as mentioned by Tellegen and Atkinson (1974) resonates with me as an important concept in my own experience of accompanying, and is an ingredient that it appears may contribute to the flow experiences I have felt during both performances and rehearsals.

I remember a particularly memorable rehearsal with a good friend of mine. We had worked together many times before and had already developed a good rapport as singer and accompanist. We were rehearsing a song to sing at her birthday party, and as we rehearsed it there was this absolute sense of oneness and empathy that came between us—it was just wonderful—she

made me cry. Everything around us was blocked out except for the performance—the connection between the words and the music—the singer and the accompanist. I was concerned that perhaps at the performance I would get emotional too, but it didn't happen. The public performance of this did not have the power that our private rehearsal had when we were both relaxed and open to each other's emotional expression of the music (Personal journal, February 2009).

This journal extract is particularly useful as I critically reflect (as per Schön, 1983, 1987) on the phenomenon of focused attention as a characteristic of the flow experience, especially for musicians in collaborative performance. My own account of this memorable phenomenon seems to support the theory posited by Tellegen and Atkinson (1974): that some individuals are more able to develop cognitive skills in focused attention and high levels of concentration. Certainly, during this rehearsal, I was able to block out all other external phenomena and focus entirely on the performance at hand, which enabled a close empathetic experience between singer and accompanist. These are the performance moments that I treasure, and which are hard to define and describe, even when the performance itself is captured on mechanical video and audio recording. Such high levels of empathy are important characteristics of commanding and strong stage performance (Blake, 1998) and are often associated with clear and confident levels of body language between the performers (Davidson, 2005). The two journal extracts I have that refer to actual recital performances make clear reference to the importance of body language and other such signals between the performers. The journals also point to the possibility that through intense concentration, one of the characteristics of flow, the body language between performers becomes even more evident and an important part of the enjoyment of the experience from the point of view of the performers.

### ***Mindfulness and flow***

In the last twenty years, the concept of mindfulness has gained considerable attention in the field of clinical and empirical psychology. It is linked to the phenomenon of flow in that it is a psychological state of focused attention that allows a person to become totally aware “in the moment” (Miller, Fletcher, & Kabat-Zinn, 1995). Stemming from Asian meditative practices, the aim of mindfulness is “to cultivate a stable and nonreactive present moment awareness.

This is usually accomplished through a regular daily discipline involving both formal and informal mindfulness practices” (Miller, et al., 1995, p. 193). Kabat-Zinn and others have reported the successful application of mindfulness techniques in medical interventions to help reduce chronic pain (Kabat-Zinn, 1982; Kabat-Zinn & Burney, 1981; Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth, Sellers, Brew, & Burney, 1984; Miller, et al., 1995). Langer describes mindful people as those who are open to new ideas, new ways of doing things, different points of view, who possess a creative and flexible approach to life and its challenges. In relation to piano performance, mindfulness can be used to explain the intense concentration that is needed for a concert pianist to memorise many concertos and concert works (Langer, 1989).

The link between flow and mindfulness has been explored in a number of contexts (Reid, 2011; Wright, et al., 2006). Wright, Sadlo and Stew (2006) report that their research participants, an artist, a musician and a horticulturalist, explained their flow experiences in ways that resonate with the concept of mindfulness. While they reported these similarities, they also noted that there are distinct differences between the experience of flow and the experience of mindfulness. The participants

noted that they experienced feelings of joy, elation and the ability to cope with life's stresses during the flow experiences, while mindfulness left them feeling relaxed and at peace with the world. Reid (2011) posits that the experience and practice of flow and mindfulness are important in understanding occupational engagement and an understanding of the links between the two can enhance depth and meaning of occupational experiences, as well as health and well-being. Bishop et al. (2004) regard mindfulness as “a process of investigative awareness that involves observing the ever-changing flow of private experience” (Bishop, et al., 2004, p. 234), thus making it a useful concept for consideration in relation to flow. Csikszentmihalyi (1993) also acknowledges that flow has close links with the experience of transcendence, or going beyond oneself, and sensing oneself as being part of something larger (Maslow, 1971), noting that flow experiences are often accompanied by feelings of transcendence, where people feel at one with their surroundings and experience a sense of “universal harmony” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, p. xiv). Bernard (2009) provides examples of narratives that describe experiences of transcendence while playing music, linking these experiences with the phenomenon of flow.

## **Vignette**

The following narrative is an extract from my personal journal, which recalls a recital performance between a young professional singer and myself. This was a very memorable and enjoyable performance for me and, on reflection, the characteristics of focused attention and mindfulness as recalled through the journal entry seemed to be integral to the performance experience.

### **The performance: Cabaret with solo vocalist and piano**

I felt very relaxed before we started. We arrived about 6pm—so with an hour to spare you don't feel rushed. The performance itself went very smoothly. I felt in control at all times and was calm as I prepared ahead for each sequence so that I was ready for my own solo singing bits, page turns, cuts and vamps as required. It really was enjoyable to play for Peter.

I recall how easy it was to perform with him. I didn't have to look at him at all. I watched and read the music intently, but I could feel his intentions with the voice. I could hear his breath and I hooked onto his breathing so that we became one as we performed the songs. It is so much more exciting to accompany a singer than an instrumentalist. This issue of the breath! The intake of the breath is also linked to the body and even the slightest movement of the body can signal to me the intentions of tempo, nuance of phrase, level of dynamic. Peter is so good at signaling these things. I can see and hear enough without directly watching him. The peripheral vision works a treat in these circumstances.

### **After the performance**

“I loved the performance last night,” said my colleague as we entered the staff room for our morning cup of tea.

It was the morning after the concert—a Monday morning—and we were both enjoying a break from the emails and the admin that swamped us every day. It was a jolt back to reality after such a euphoric high the night before.

“I had a fantastic time too,” I replied. “He is such a fantastic performer, so confident, and so easy to accompany.”

“You were very relaxed last night,” he went on. “You seem to be getting better and better, if that is possible, with your accompanying.”

“I am feeling relaxed,” I replied, but I couldn’t give any immediate reasons for this.

It was a good point to reflect on and think about—there’s something in this—the relaxation—that seems critical to good accompanying. I had certainly enjoyed the experience. It was a great challenge and used all my skills in performance as well as all those extra-sensory skills that you need to have as an effective accompanist—the ability to tune it to body language and breath as an indicator of the intentions of the performer. I am starting to get really stuck on this idea of breath as an important skill for a pianist. More reflection and thought needed here I think.

This vignette, as with all narrative inquiry, is written in such a way that the reader can “share something of what the experience might have been for the participants” (Clandinin, & Connelly, 1991, p. 277). The story relates an experience I had as a piano accompanist in a cabaret performance with a professional singer and the subsequent discussion of the performance with a colleague and critical friend. My colleague has heard many performances of mine as an accompanist and, being a singer himself, understands the importance of the relationship between singer and pianist to the success of a performance (Davis, 2005; Mansell, 1996).

One of the repeated motifs in this narrative is that of relaxation. I had experienced a sense of relaxation during the performance and my colleague with his keen understanding of musical interaction and communication also noted this aspect of the performance. What was particularly important was that the relaxation, which began early in the evening, did not result in feelings of apathy, but rather a heightened sense of awareness. It was as if the relaxation gave me the opportunity to pay even more attention to the details of the musical performance and the finely tuned interaction between singer and pianist that took this experience into the realms of truly memorable experience. The state of relaxation opened the way for a more intense level of concentration or focused attention, and this was facilitated by a relaxed and open mind. Moreover, this experience of mindfulness, being ‘aware of my awareness’ (Reid, 2011) and being ‘in the moment’ was felt not only by myself, but also by a member of the audience. This provides some validity for this link between focused attention, concentration and mindfulness as they occur in an intensely enjoyable experience during piano accompaniment.

The experience of being ‘in the moment’ resonates with the meditative practices mentioned in May’s (2005) intuitive inquiry of her creative practice. May explains her experience of mindfulness, a specific form of subjective awareness, while engaged in the creative practice of painting.

This watchful self-reflective state is the same mental alertness achieved in the process of painting. While I paint I am focused on staying in the subjective now and become aware of many different states of mind. ...In painting I learned to come back to the present, just putting paint on the paper, again and again, teaching my mind to ignore its distractions, similar to when in a disciplined meditative practice I return my focus to the natural rhythmic action of breathing in and breathing out (May, 2005, p. 42).

Another motif in this vignette is the importance of the breath. My narrative tells of my recollection of being linked with the breath of the singer—becoming as one performer through the breath. The breath for a singer is not only a mechanism for sustaining the sound, but it is linked to the emotional quality of the performance

and links to the very essence of the singer herself. Järviö (2006) confirms the importance of the breath to a singer: “Breathing is not something we do. Rather, one could say that we are being breathed. There is in us a movement of breathing that is an expression of a life force in us. The freer and fuller our respiration is, the more responsive we are to the inner, vibrating space of our body” (Järviö, 2006, p. 72). She describes the experience of finding the breath in terms of a deep awareness of the breath and the body and “her findings stress the importance of recognising the spiritual in our accounts of mind and body and the possibilities of developing instructional practices that treat breath not as a technical skill, but the very background in and through which we come to know the possibilities of music and its transformative powers” (Stubley, Arho, Järviö, & Mali, 2006, p. 41). Mali (2006) also describes a similar awareness that a pianist can experience when they study their own performance practice and comes to the conclusion that a pianist needs to understand the process of interpretation of a musical work as a “matter of bodily being in the sound, of being open to its myriad possibilities” (Stubley, et al., 2006, p. 41). Each of these writers is reporting on the phenomenon of musical experience from a personal perspective, and each of them contribute to a deeper understanding of the connection between focused attention, flow and mindfulness during music performance, as well as confirming my own experience of these phenomena as a piano accompanist.

## Limitations of the study

An autoethnography is by definition a case study of the self. Consistent with case study methodology (Stake, 1995, 2000, 2005; Yin, 2009), it is not possible to generalise the findings of my study for all piano accompanists in collaborative music performance situations. However, case studies have been shown to have value in understanding a particular, subjective viewpoint. Contending for a renewed consideration of the use of case study methodology in the generation of knowledge, Flyvbjerg (2006, 2011) argues that the knowledge gained through study of individual cases contributes cumulatively to a broader understanding of a phenomenon.

The data gathered in this study presents a personal account of many types of optimal experiences as a piano accompanist, and while other piano accompanists may empathise with these situations, they are unique to my own experience as a collaborative performer. As with many forms of qualitative research that rely on the memory of the researcher or the research participants to describe an experience or an event an autoethnographer also relies on memory, albeit aided by personal documentation such as journal and diary entries, newspaper clippings, video and audio recordings and other similar artefacts. Tedlock (2000) observes that ethnographers have had to meet this type of challenge to their research for some time. While they may seek to triangulate their interview data with observation data, they too face challenges in the interpretation of their observations and dealing with the memory of their research participants. The passage of time, experience and the ontological perspective of the researcher can distort the memory of these events (Bochner & Ellis, 1996; DeVault, 1997) and it is only through the careful checking of data from a variety of sources that such distortions in the interpretation of qualitative data can be minimised. The data for my study has been created from a number of artefact sources such as personal journals, concert programs, newspaper clippings, audio and video recordings, as well as professional conversations (Healy, Ehrich, Hansford, & Stewart, 2001; Orland-Barak, 2006; Tillema & Orland-Barak, 2006) with my musical collaborators that are mentioned in the narrative, thus achieving a greater sense of verisimilitude for the reader.

## Conclusion

Using autobiographical narratives (journal entries and vignettes), this paper explores aspects of the phenomenon of flow for a piano accompanist. As explained by Clandinin and Connelly (1991, p. 277) “narrative inquiries are shared in ways that help readers question their own stories, raise their own questions about practices, and see in narrative accounts stories of their own stories.” The analysis of these narratives gives me the opportunity to begin to create a theory for understanding the phenomenon of flow for a piano accompanist (Duncan, 2004; Fawcett & Downs, 1992; George & Bennett, 2004; Gregor, 2002; Pace, 2004). This paper has considered one particular aspect of the phenomenon of flow, focused attention, or concentration, and the links between this aspect of flow and mindfulness, another concept often linked to flow (Langer, 1989; Livingston, 1989; Wright, et al., 2006). The preliminary analysis of this data indicates that there is a strong link between these two phenomena, contributing to the broader theory for understanding the phenomenon of flow during collaborative music performance as a piano accompanist. By exploring one case, an autoethnographic study of my own experience, I aim to open the experience of flow in collaborative performance for a piano accompanist to a wider audience. This has the potential to add more understanding to the phenomenon of flow that was first defined by Csikszentmihalyi and subsequently studied by many other researchers in diverse fields in the arts and sciences.

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