

Self-Evaluation: The Key to Artful Practice

The single most important goal for performing artists is to see how they are doing.”-Itzhak Perlman, violinist ([The Musician’s Way](#), p. 202)

Suppose that you’re practicing a new piece. How do you know that one portion is learned securely enough for you to tackle another?

Later on, how do you determine that the music is concert-ready?

Then, following a performance, what enables you to pinpoint the aspects of your execution that need polishing?

The answer, of course, is accurate self-evaluation.

We musicians display our knack for self-assessment with every phrase that we play or sing. Our performances inescapably reveal whether we truly hear ourselves and perceive the impact of our delivery.

But how do we become expert self-evaluators?

Very gradually, it seems.

Self-assessment involves constellations of skills, and all of those abilities mature incrementally over time.

Wouldn’t it be ideal, though, if we could speed up the maturation process?

Given that music students who lack self-evaluation skills are hamstrung by their obliviousness, I’ve been striving for decades to discover ways in which I can help rising musicians perceive their work honestly.

Here are 6 tried-and-true strategies.

1. Practice Accessible Music Only [manageable music](#) leaves us with the mental bandwidth we need to sense every aspect of our execution.

In the words of Robert Schumann, “Endeavour to play easy pieces well and with elegance; that is better than to play difficult pieces badly.”

2. Record Yourself Both in practice and performance, we should regularly employ [audio and video recorders](#), and then evaluate our recordings in targeted ways.

With an audio recording of a solo, for instance, we might listen once to a section and assess our rhythm; for a second appraisal we could focus on intonation; on a third pass we might weigh our dynamics, vibrato, articulation, tone, or other expressive effects.

When reviewing a video, we should gauge our stage presence and look for any mannerisms that we might unconsciously display (e.g., raised shoulders, stiffness, grimaces, inordinate movements).

3. Assess for ExcellenceAs we practice, we continually need to sense whether our actions vibrate with habits of excellence. Those habits are elaborated on throughout The Musician's Way, but, in a nutshell, they are: ease, expressiveness, accuracy, rhythmic vitality, beautiful tone, focused attention, and positive attitude.

For example, as we play or sing, we should insist on ease, and never let ourselves push through difficulties or execute phrases at uncontrollable tempos.

4. Treat Errors as Crucial InformationErrors alert us to faults in our preparation; they provide us with crucial feedback. We mustn't fear or loathe them. Instead, in response to errors, we should eagerly isolate and solve the problems that cause us to misstep.

Musicians who become upset by mistakes tend not to notice many glitches because, unconsciously, they want to avoid suffering. So they'll heedlessly distort their music rather than refurbish clumsy phrases.

5. Seek FeedbackWe learn the most at the edges of our knowledge. And all of us filter what we perceive, so we often can't evaluate with untarnished objectivity. Other viewpoints, therefore, are crucial to our growth.

When I assess my own work, for instance, I perpetually assume that I'm missing something. For that reason, I ask others to read my writing, listen to my playing, critique my concert programming ideas, and so forth.

When a colleague points out something that I've overlooked, I rejoice, because I recognize that my awareness has been expanded.

6. Assess with DetachmentWe're passionate about music, but we must evaluate our work somewhat dispassionately, almost as if it weren't coming from us.

What I mean is that, when we size up our playing of a phrase, we should ask things like, "How was the timing in that melody?" Not how was my timing but how was the timing.

Similarly, if we're using a mirror to help with a technical problem at an instrument, we should examine the actions of our hands as just hands. Not our hands. Then we can ask whether what we see reflects what we desire.