

**Georgios Kachrimanis**  
**Research Paper**  
**Master's in Trombone**

**The Joy of Practice**  
**A case study of *Keren* by Iannis Xenakis**

**The pursuit of happiness in our practice room**

Student No: 012603

Main Teachers: T. Dowling, P. Saunders  
Coaches: P. Scheepers  
Circle Leader: S. Williams

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## Introduction

When I was accepted as a master student in the Royal Conservatoire of The Hague I wanted to write my master's thesis about the differences between music education in Greece and in The Netherlands. However, I soon found out that this subject was not offering me any artistic gain or improvement in my skills. After discussing my proposed thesis topic with friends and colleagues, I decided to focus on a more personal subject, which would also help me in my personal and professional development as a musician.

During my time as a student at the Conservatoire, I had some minor successes and several failures in my musical development and career. Despite my best efforts, I was unable to improve my practice sessions in order to obtain better results in the classroom and the concerts/auditions. I was always nervous and uptight; and quite frankly, I never felt sufficiently prepared. The few occasions when I was playing music and enjoying it was when I wasn't paying any attention to the result or when I was playing with a big group/orchestra. Everybody had great expectations of me because they believed I had great potential and was a big musical talent, but most of the time I felt and thought the opposite. My biggest thought was that my musical development and my so called "talent" was just a product of hard work.

Every musician perceives "hard work" differently in their career and/or education. For me it was something like weight lifting training with the motto **"No Pain, No Gain"**. This was my idea about practicing music for more than 15 years, conducting extensive daily routines for 3-4 hours a day, with long tones in the extreme of the trombone registers, flexibilities and slurs from low register to high register, and especially in the high register with great volume and power. In the scales and technique, I emphasised speed and, of course, high register. Indeed, the main concern of almost every brass player in the world is how to play in the high register. For me, this was no exception. Accordingly, my practice focused on that. The results were not as I hoped, mostly because I was overdoing it. I kept practicing for years this way even when I was exhausted after 20 minutes of playing. I did this because I believed in "No Pain, No Gain" and that: "You could only achieve your dreams with hard work." Not only did I not achieve my desired end result with this mantra, but practicing in this manner gave me anxiety as well.

A productive practice can be intense and demanding, but it should also be pleasing and feel rewarding. As musicians we 'play' an instrument; play implies playfulness, which is enjoyable. I noticed that I was not enjoying myself anymore as I did as a young boy, but that I was 'working' the trombone. When I was accepted in the Master's program of the Conservatoire I knew I had to change something about my way of practicing. Some descriptive words and phrases that came to mind when I thinking about a great performance: confident; having a good time; focused; lost in the moment; en-

gaged; enjoying the music; and inspired. But I was feeling and thinking the exact opposite: uncertain; anxious; frustrated; tired; uninspired etc. The “No Pain, No Gain” mantra clearly was not working for me, and to be honest I don't think it works for anybody except for bodybuilders.

While at the Conservatoire, I never really had the chance to attend classes concerning Practice Methods or Practice Techniques. The only time I had the chance was during some brass classes where Mrs. S. Williams explained to us the idea of “Practice in the Flow.” It was during the Alexander Technic classes where the idea of enjoying the playing the instrument was planted in my mind. I came to understand that I had the wrong approach to my daily routines and etudes, which resulted in my poor exam results and auditions. Those classes were a first starting point in changing my approach. Nevertheless, a pivotal moment that triggered this change was the conference “From Potential to Performance,” which I attended in 2013.<sup>1</sup> During the conference, I listened to scholars and teachers who studied the relationship between musical practice and the physical and mental condition of its practitioners. They talked about the same problems I encountered during my daily practice: the need for better understanding of how to practice and prepare for the stage. One of the programs I attended was “How to plan your practising” by Erja Joukamo-Ampuja.<sup>2</sup> The information I gained from that program immediately helped me with my daily practice. Unfortunately I only attended this program.

Even after the conference, I still had a lot of questions about how to improve my practice sessions. I had to find this information myself. I started conducting research in the library and on the Internet about music practice guides. Through my research, I discovered that many books mentioned a mental/emotional approach to practicing music. Furthermore, the books described that flow and joy during practice are beneficial for improving performance and motivating musicians. This was something new to me.

As a young boy, I always enjoyed playing music, but when I grew up, this joy shifted to harsh and tiresome sessions, which, in turn, caused anxiety. I wanted to gain back the feelings I had as a child about music. This need, and my experience and my research in this area, helped me formulate the following Master's thesis research question: **“How can I bring the joy back into my daily practice.”**

To answer this question I will first start with the physical approach to practice planning. Here, I will mention the insights I gained from the program “How to plan your practising” by Erja Joukamo-Ampuja. I am beginning with this because it was through this program that I learned a lot about endurance, strength, feeling less guilty, recovery and more patience in my process (as opposed to my original “No Pain, No Gain” mentality). Specifically, practice planning gave me some of the physical tools I needed to achieve my goals; however, I was still missing the psychological tools needed to deal

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<sup>1</sup> Conference ‘From Potential to Performance’, 11-13 October 2013, Royal Conservatoire, The Hague.

<sup>2</sup> Presentation Erja Joukamo-Ampuja about the Practice methods applied at the Sibelius Academy at the Conference ‘From Potential to Performance.’

with my issues of anxiety and joy. The second chapter of my thesis, which deals with these tools, includes information and insights into flow-theories, along with some guide books for improving musical performance (e.g., *The Inner Game of Music*) that I discovered during my literature review.

Since the beginning of my Master's program, I wanted to perform *Keren* by Iannis Xenakis at my final recital. Accordingly, in my final chapter I will use *Keren* as a case piece to apply all of the insights and new approaches I gained for my daily practice. In the presentation of my Master's thesis in March 2015, I will present my findings.

Even though the main goal of my thesis is to find joy during my daily practice, I set another goal for myself as well: to improve my practice sessions so that they would become more structured, productive, and mostly less anxious and stressful. Ultimately, I want the final findings of this thesis to serve as the basis for the ongoing improvement of my musical performance, and hopefully inspire my fellow students and colleagues in the future to find joy in their music.

# CHAPTER I

## Physical Approach and Practice Planning

As I mentioned in my introduction, in the past my practice sessions could be described as a heavy lifting program in a gym. My aim always was to play faster, louder, and higher. I was convinced that “no pain” was equivalent to “no gain.”

My usual practice day started early in the morning before I went to work as a bank clerk. Working as a bank clerk was a full time job. Accordingly, I would wake up at 5.00 a.m. in the morning and I would practice until 7.30 a.m. After working an eight hour shift at the bank, I would go directly to practice and would play music until I could not (physically) play anymore. If, by any chance, I couldn't practice more than 5 hours at extreme intensity, I would feel extremely disappointed and guilty. Practicing and studying next to my job also led me to severe sleep deprivation and physical exhaustion. Many studies have already proven that these conditions are not ideal for optimal performance.<sup>3</sup> Besides the fact that I was extremely tired, I was treating my practice sessions as daily boring routines and not as real music. I just wanted to get them done so I could go on with my day. There was no fun, no flow or joy. I will explore my thoughts behind my routines in greater detail in the next chapters. Preceding this, I will address my physical and technical approach to the playing of the trombone with my “no pain, no gain” mentality.

Primarily, my warm up/daily routines came out of a book of some renowned trombone teacher or player. The books included a variety of exercises to help a musician to overcome the challenges of work as a professional player. Like any other brass player, I only focussed on how to play high register notes easy and fast. I was only eager to learn the higher register of the instrument (always guided by my “no pain, no gain” mentality), which meant that I conducted many difficult exercises for several hours in the hopes of being eventually rewarded for my efforts. But, in the end, I achieved the opposite; I became tired and frustrated, and this manifested into poor performance. This type of practising also left me with little time to physically recover between sessions.

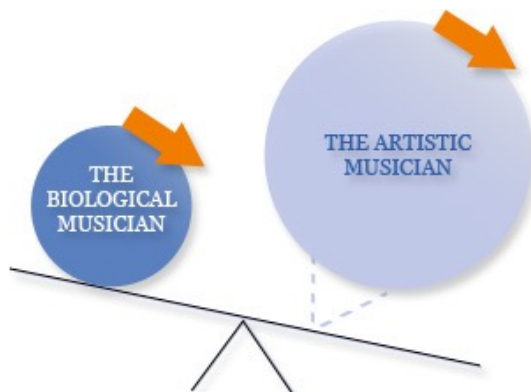
To make a crude comparison, I was like a professional athlete (e.g., a runner) training for the Olympics without a training plan. In order to achieve the level you need for such a performance, you have to prepare for years with a solid training plan. However, if you just run 10 km without a build-up training schedule, you will injure yourself because the body is totally unprepared for the run. I had no similar training plan or schedule with my trombone playing. I stayed stuck at a certain performance level; there was no improvement for years. Aiming for the highest level can be a good motivator to help you in your musical development but only to a certain degree; overextending yourself, in the manner that I did, can lead to great physical and mental tension, which, in turn, leads to poor performance and little to no personal and professional development.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://harvardmagazine.com/2005/07/deep-into-sleep.html>

When I was accepted to the Master's program at the Royal Conservatory, I first wanted to look for an answer to this performance problem on a physical level. I attended the Conference 'From Potential to Performance: Training Performing Musicians in Conservatories' at the Royal Conservatoire, where one of the main speakers was Erja Joukamo-Ampuja from the Sibelius Academy in Finland.<sup>4</sup> She presented us with a new innovative way of practicing how to build muscular strength, endurance, and recovery. The method was not new at all. It was based on the techniques that professional coaches used for years for training athletes. The brass and wind clinic of Joukamo-Ampuja inspired me to rethink my own practicing schedule and my physical approach to trombone playing.

Joukamo-Ampuja found her answers on the physical problems with brass playing in sports medicine and she developed lecture material on the topic, titled 'How to practice sensibly.' This later grew to the course Musicians' Health and Wellbeing for new students at the Sibelius Academy. In the course, students are introduced to the 'biological musician;' the mental and physical areas of competence –partly inherited and partly acquired – which affect how a musician's skills will develop and be maintained.<sup>5</sup> The biological musician is the foundation and frame of reference for developing artistry and playing music. The body of a musician is the other half of the instrument. If there is too much strain on the artistic musical development it will have consequences for the body; for example, receptive strain injury. Moreover, physical factors, like age, gender, body shape, ergonomics, general wellbeing, health etc. also influence the artistic musician. Both have to be in balance.



A brass player uses small delicate muscles in his or her face. These muscles are not designed by nature to support the effort and strain we force on them with playing music. We need a good strategy in order to utilize these muscles to the best of our abilities without causing short or long terms injuries during our practice sessions. Because I am also a fan of running I did some of my one research in the sports section and found

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<sup>4</sup> Conference 'From Potential to Performance', 11-13 October 2013, Royal Conservatoire, The Hague.

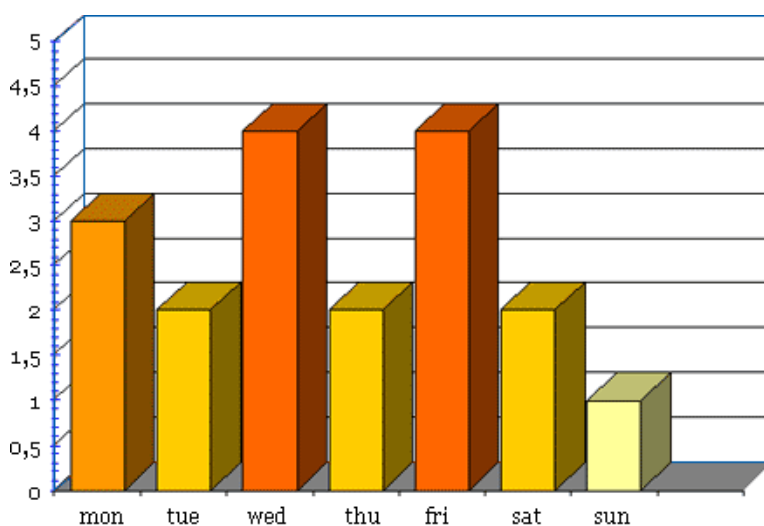
<sup>5</sup> <http://www2.siba.fi/harjoittelu/index.php?id=5&la=en>

some common tips and training schedules.<sup>6</sup> Most of them I apply nowadays in my daily running training:

- Set achievable goals for the near and future (don't do too much too soon)
- Plan your weekly training in intervals of variable intensity, speed and distances
- Add strength training
- Keep your posture straight and erect
- Get good nutrition and stay hydrated
- Don't ignore warning signs (listen to your body and its limitations)
- Ensure you warm up, cool down and give your body a chance to recover (rest)

In her lectures Joukamo-Ampuja also deals with the same topics such as the biological limitations to playing, short and long term recovery, planning your practice, recognising injuries, and engaging in basic ergonomic exercises, among other things. The students developed better endurance and strength, had better practice planning, were more aware of their limitations, and felt less guilty in their free time. Mental training, coping strategies, breathing and relaxation techniques were also an important part of the course. I was especially interested in determining whether there was something in Joukamo-Ampuja's practice planning for me.

According to Joukamo-Ampuja, continuity and systematic planning are the cornerstones of practice. Her practice planning is very similar to the interval running schedules. It stresses the gradual progressive practice, a varied programme, and recovery.



The planning is divided in short term (daily/weekly) and long term (month) and contains an estimate of the total daily loading. In the beginning you should define your loading of playing in a scale and keep a diary of it.

Fig. 1: Daily/weekly rhythm. Practice loading can be measured on a scale (loading index) of 0–5. The numbers don't denote hours, but are defined for example as 0 = rest day to 5 = very

<sup>6</sup> Here are some sources I found: <http://www.halhigdon.com/training/51153/Marathon-Multiple-Marathons-Training-Program>, <http://www.runnersworld.com/race-training/marathon-advantage?page=single>, <http://www.runnersworld.com/race-training/marathon-advantage?page=single>, <http://running.about.com/od/get-started-with-running/tp/runningtips.htm>.

heavy day.<sup>7</sup>

Because light days are alternated with heavy days, the muscles will be able to recover but still achieve a sufficient level of intensity in demanding exercises. For the long term planning, every fourth week should be a recovery week because the tiny blood vessels (capillary) networks need time to renew. These networks are very important for the transport of energy to the muscles. Failing to give these vessels some rest will eventually lead to overtraining.

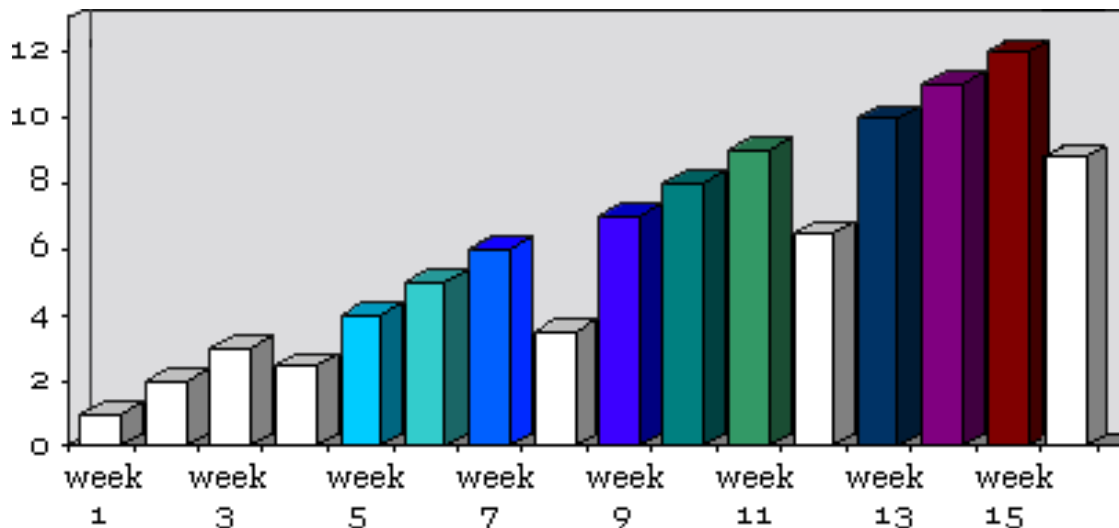


Fig. 2: Long term recovery and planning.<sup>8</sup>

For a competition or an examination preparation, Joukamo-Ampuja recommends that the week should be the lowest of in them of total loading with only two practice peaks, with the last peak 4-5 days before the exam/concert/competition. Comparatively, in marathon-training the last three weeks are the most important to get some rest. Studies show that tapering in the weeks before are good for the depleted levels of muscle glycogen, enzymes, antioxidants, and hormones to return to optimal ranges.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, planning and recovery are essential in getting improvement in performance.

Applying these ideas from the conference with my notes, I made the following planning schedule adjusted to my own personal program:

- I made a weekly schedule with different levels of practice, heavy or light for each day of the week with one free day. The scale I am using is numbered from 0 to 10 with 0 being day I don't play at all and 10 a day that I play so much that my em-

<sup>7</sup> <http://www2.siba.fi/harjoittelu/index.php?id=133&la=en>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www2.siba.fi/harjoittelu/index.php?id=135&la=en>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.runnersworld.com/race-training/its-taper-time?page=single>

bouchure can't even form to produce a whistling sound. The first third and fifth day, I will usually have the heavy load of playing in the week. On the second fourth and sixth day I am planning to have lighter practice. The seventh day is usually a day off or a day that I play very easy and fun to play music. I based my schedule on of the theories that was mentioned at the conference: "It takes your muscles about 24 hours on average to recover from a demanding practice session. On the following day, which should include a light practice session, your body will further strengthen the stressed muscles."<sup>10</sup> My daily practice scale has levels from zero to ten, from recovery to over the chart (see fig. 3).

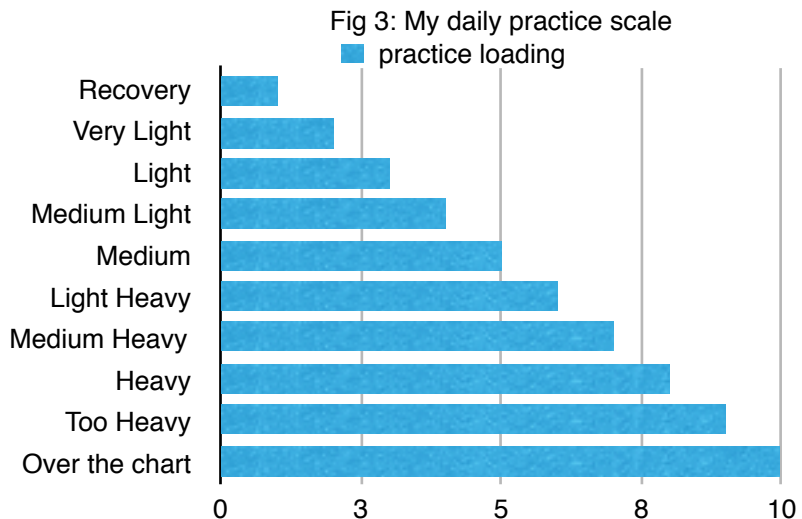
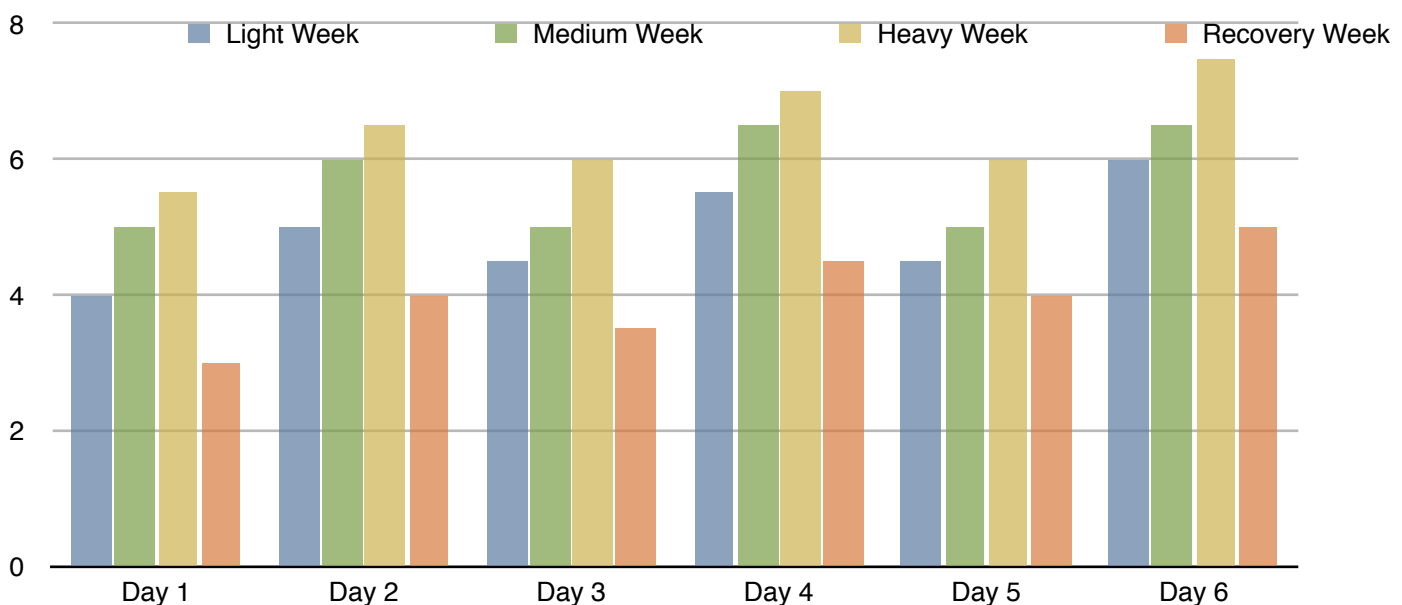


Fig. 4: My long term planning



- My long term practice planning was also changed. I followed the example of the same theory as mentioned above and each week of the month for 3 months has a different level of practice ranging from light, medium, heavy and recovery week, which is lighter than the light week. During the second, I noticed my muscles were stronger. So

<sup>10</sup> Bergen, M. van den (ed.), *From potential to performance. Training Practice and Performance Preparation in Conservatoires*, Royal Conservatoire publications, The Hague 2014, p.34.

I used the same scale, but with a heavier loading for the second and third month. The next charts depict my long term planning. As I made progress the scale became proportionally heavier. When I started a 3,5 on the scale it was a light practice in the first month, but in the third month a 3,5 was proportionally heavier than a light practice in beginning.

After I decided to follow this new way of planning I set a maximum time on my daily routines. I found out that for me one and a half hour is plenty. At first, I thought this might not seem enough to improve my technical skills, but because I applied a new planning with recovery times and more variety in the practice I managed to achieve my goals without over-practicing.

- The next step was to keep a practice diary. I took a simple white paper book in which I could write down a detailed plan for everyday and I kept track of my planned level of practice for the day, the week and month. In my diary, I kept track of how long and what I played, the breaks, what went well and not so well, the endurance, technical aspects, my mood/concentration, the level of enjoyment or frustration of the day and other factors (mostly psychological) that influenced my practice. If I changed the weekly/daily planning I would write down the reasons. For example, I made a miscalculation of the practice level of the previous day, which left me too tired the next day.

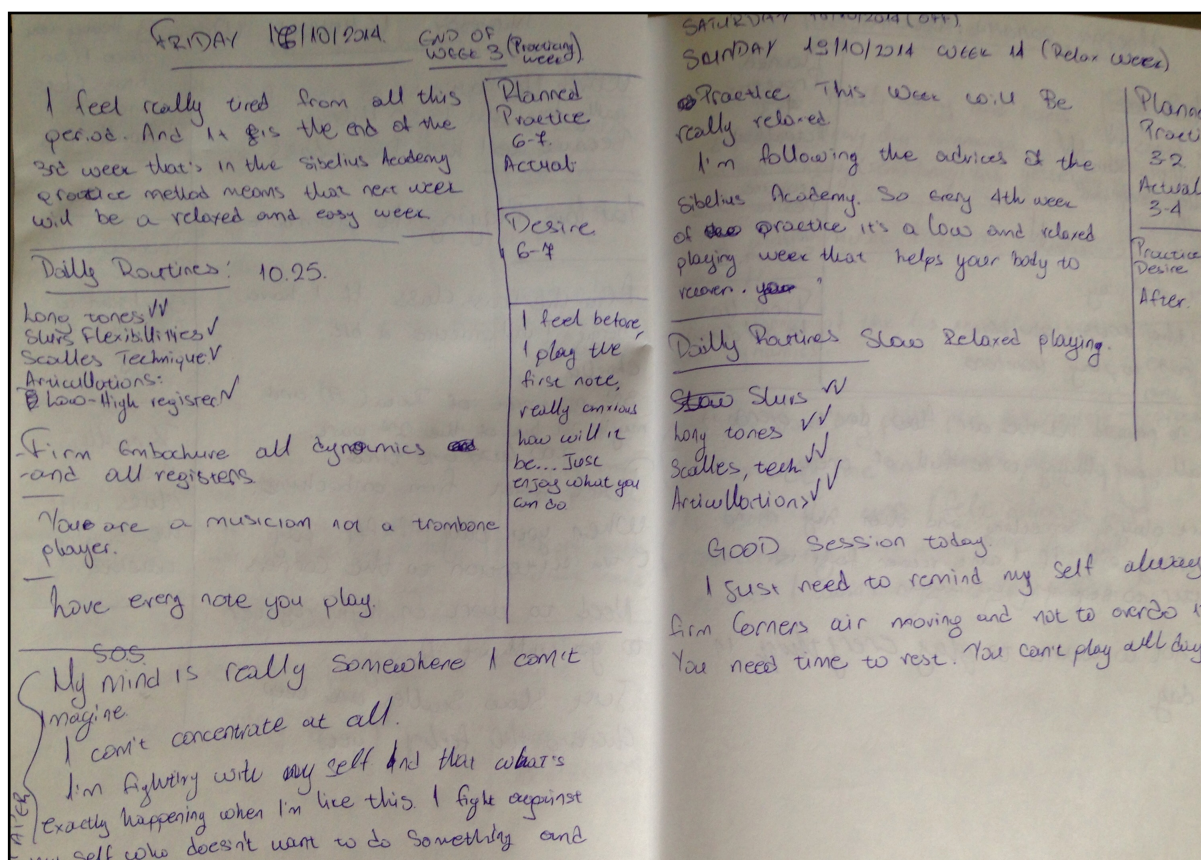


Fig. 5: Photograph of my diary.

One big subject in my diary was the daily routines. I set some goals for myself that were integrated in the planning and my daily routines. I needed to practice every day to be able to perform at a professional level. I made the next technical categories, the basics or daily routines:

- Long tones
- Scales/Technique
- Flexibilities
- Intervals
- Articulation

Each day I would vary between the categories. One day I focused more on the long tones, the next day on flexibilities etc. The reason for this variation is that I normally used to spend hours working only on my basics. Spending hours on the basics left me tired and out of energy to practice more demanding music like concertos and etudes, etc. As everybody knows basics are really tiring for the body but also for the mind because quite frankly, they are boring. I had to get away from the way that I was practicing all of my life and find my own way. Thus, I made a variable practice instead of a long repeating practice of all of the basics in one day. I wrote down in my diary what this new way of practicing did for me. I felt that I had more energy after a practice, less guilty, and I saw that I could follow the progress I made in the charts. Because I was using a diary, I became more and more aware of this. In the end, it's not about how much I practiced but the way I practiced (the process). The only way to find my own way was to keep track of it in a diary. This way I could reflect on what I was doing and change my planning and the way I was practicing.

All of the positive changes that I experienced after my new approach in planning, such as more energy, better focus, skill improvement, learning progress, and easier playing with more joy (to name a few), were not only due to making a good practice schedule. My self-awareness and motivation were also important factors in my skill development. Writing about my thoughts and mindset while playing in my diary, made me realise that I had to treat my mind as an ally and not the enemy. In my next chapter, I will focus more on these psychological aspects of practicing my daily routines, emphasizing how my initial wrong psychological approach to practice led to poor results and feelings of depression, frustration and guilt.

## CHAPTER II

# Psychological Training: Anxiety - Enjoyment

Performance anxiety or stage fright is a common problem among musicians, even for me. Before an audition or a concert, I get so anxious that sometimes even in my practice room I can't perform as good as I am able to. For this paper, I am especially interested in how to cope with the anxieties that influence my daily practice. During my Master's program I found a lot of information in books I read about performance anxiety/stage fright. However, they don't mention the everyday anxieties or how to deal with them during an ordinary practice. Nonetheless, the tools the authors provide for managing performance anxiety/stage fright did provide me some insights for my daily practice. One of them is the experience of flow and finding joy in my practice. That's why I want to go deeper in this chapter on these two main topics, anxiety and joy, and how they influenced my daily practice. I won't go into theories that explain the origins and types of anxiety, or give a literature review about performance anxiety. I will only briefly discuss the definitions and the symptoms and then describe my own experiences and process.

Anxiety is something most of us experience from time to time, in different intensities and under varying circumstances. It can hit you when you are confronted with a very ordinary situation like making a phone call, or a stressful situation such as playing an instrument for a big audience. The feeling can be mildly or extremely uncomfortable. To quote Wikipedia: "Anxiety is an unpleasant state of inner turmoil, often accompanied by nervous behaviour, such as pacing back and forth, somatic complaints and rumination. It is the subjectively unpleasant feelings of dread over anticipated events, such as the feeling of imminent death." Anxiety differs from fear, because fear has a clear object, an actual danger. In contrast to fear, anxiety is linked to uncertainty, which often gives a feeling of insecurity.<sup>11</sup> The definition of performance anxiety can be found in multiple sources and is often used interchangeable with stage fright. But anxiety and stage fright are not exactly the same. According to Ariadna Ortiz Brugués, stage fright is a normal reaction which should be optimised to enhance accomplishments in the performance situation.<sup>12</sup>

Before a big concert a number of physiological changes start to occur. A musician may become tense, begin to sweat, or have feelings of nausea etc. On stage we may draw a blank on the notes we had perfectly memorised just weeks before, even though we can play them perfectly during an everyday practice. The symptoms such as fear and anxiety begin to occur that only inhibit the particular situations of performance on stage. Accordingly, stage fright is limited to certain situations in which our bodily and mental

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<sup>11</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anxiety>

<sup>12</sup> Ortiz Brugués, A., *Music Performance Anxiety. A Review of the Literature*, Freiburg 2009, p. 1

alarm system can interfere with the musical performance. The alarm system normally enhances our survival when we are confronted with real danger, like a big tiger. In the case of stage fright, musicians are confronted with an audience with high expectations. A bit of fear can give a musician focus and an energy boost to perform, but stage fright can also be counterproductive when it turns into panic.<sup>13</sup>

Performance anxiety or stage fright is just one of the types of anxiety. The symptoms of anxiety can be:

- Somatic (hyper arousal or acute stress response that produces a range of bodily sensations that prepare the body to meet the perceived challenge);
- Emotional (anxiety, fear, panic);
- Cognitive (worry, dread, inattention and distractibility, lack of concentration, memory loss);
- Behavioural manifestations (technical errors, memory loss, performance breaks, avoidance of performance opportunities.)<sup>14</sup>

These anxiety symptoms are quite common to musicians. For me, most of these symptoms are constant companions in my life, my daily practice, performances and lessons. During my research, I identified with a lot of thoughts and feelings that cause anxiety. Here are some examples of my own thoughts:

- “I want to be the best.”
- “I had to prove to everyone else that I can succeed as a musician especially to my mother who despised me being a musician.”
- “I need to meet the expectations of my teachers.”
- “If I want to succeed I need to practice every day x hours, because the teachers say so.”
- “I can’t take a vacation, because I will waste my practice time.”

Besides these negative thoughts about my performance, I also worried about money, my girlfriend’s problems, and was afraid of gaining weight. In addition to these, small things like a not-so-important e-mail I forgot to respond to, kept me up at night. All of these thoughts made me feel stressed, anxious and insecure. Because of these feelings, I slept and ate badly, avoiding sometime social acetates because I felt guilty when I took some time off instead of practicing.

Most people would consider having high standards a good thing because they can also push you to reach your peak level of performance. On the other hand, perfectionism involves a tendency to set standards that are so high that they either cannot be met, or are only met with great difficulty. My perfectionism also affected how I thought, felt and behaved. I was thinking things like: “Although I spent all this time preparing for a

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<sup>13</sup> Parncutt, R. and McPherson, G.E. (ed.), *The science and psychology of music performance. Creative strategies for teaching and learning*, Oxford 2002, p. 47-48.

<sup>14</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anxiety>

performance, I know I won't do well because it is not perfect". Compounding this with my anxiety, the resultant behaviour was, at times, procrastination (which I did not actually want). Indeed, because my daily practice felt like a burden, I sometimes avoided it. I was forcing myself to play the trombone, but for the wrong reasons. I constantly criticised myself for not doing a good enough job after spending a lot of time and effort on practice. It also made me feel depressed. As such, I avoided the things I had to do by doing other stuff like online gaming, watching TV for hours or not socialising with my fellow students. This made me think and feel even worse about myself.

Procrastination was only a temporary solution, and it tended to make my anxiety worse over time. Putting things off, avoiding people, and feeling overwhelmed by the high standards was not helping. One thing that made sense was to break down my high expectations or tasks into manageable steps or chunks. This is what I did with the new planning schedules (see Chapter 1). What I did was work towards bigger goals by setting small goals for myself along the way; basically, taking a step by step approach to practicing.

As I concluded in my first chapter, this planning approach helped me improve my technical and physical skills in my daily practice. Despite these improvements, I was still anxious and did not know how to make my daily practice more enjoyable. I noticed that I was still practicing for the wrong reasons (my high standards, unrealistic thoughts etc.). This led me to the conclusion that my mindset played a vital role in this process.

One important thing I learned during the conference 'From potential to performance' is that we tend to learn what we focus on. What you are focusing on at a particular stage in your life will become your reality. Focus on anxiety and that will become your reality. Focus on enjoyment and that is what you will attract. Furthermore, "Enjoyment and positive experience leads to higher performance level."<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, I came to the conclusion that by focussing on the earlier mentioned wrong reasons and the anxiety I would never be able to make my daily practice more enjoyable. I found some answers in flow theories that were discussed during the conference. An indication of flow is a feeling of joy while performing a task; although flow is also described as a deep focus on nothing but the activity – not even oneself or one's emotions.

The concept of flow was coined by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi in the 1970's. In fact, Csíkszentmihályi came upon the concept of flow as a result of researching the question "What is enjoyment?" He started by studying people who engaged in activities for enjoyment even when they weren't rewarded with money or fame. They were motivated by the quality of the experience they had while they were engaged in the activity. This optimal experience didn't come when they were relaxing, doing pleasurable things or taking drugs. Instead, it often consisted of something difficult, risky, or even painful. It usually stretched the person's capacity, provided a challenge to his or her capabilities, and in-

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<sup>15</sup> *From potential to performance. Training Practice and Performance Preparation in Conservatoires*, Royal Conservatoire publications, The Hague 2014, p. 17.

volved some discovery or novelty. According to Csíkszentmihályi “enjoyable events occur when a person has not only met some prior expectation or satisfied a need or a desire but also has gone beyond what he or she has been programmed to do and achieved something unexpected.”<sup>16</sup>

Csikszentmihalyi identified nine elements of flow that he saw repeatedly in his research:

- **A challenging activity that requires skill.** If a challenge is too demanding compared to your skill level, you will become frustrated. If it's too easy, you will get bored. In a flow experience, there is a pretty good match between your abilities and the demands of the situation. You feel engaged by the challenge, but not overwhelmed. Even routine details can be transformed into personally meaningful games that provide flow;

- **The merging of action and awareness.** Your attention is completely absorbed by the activity; you are in the moment; and you don't see yourself separate from what you are doing;

- **Clear goals and feedback.** In everyday life, there are contradictory demands and it's sometimes quite unclear what needs our attention. But in a flow experience, you have a clear purpose and a good grasp of what to do next because of feedback. When you're in flow, you know how well you're doing;

- **Concentration on the task at hand.** Because you're absorbed in the activity, you're only aware of what's relevant to the task at hand. There is no room for irrelevant information. By being focused on the activity, unease and thoughts that can cause anxiety and boredom is set aside;

- **The paradox of control.** In a state of flow, you're too involved to be concerned about failing. You just don't worry about losing control but on the other hand you know what has to be done and you just do it;

- **The loss of self consciousness.** People often spend a lot of energy monitoring how they appear to others, especially musicians. In a flow state, you're too involved in the activity to care about that and protecting your ego. You might even feel connected to something larger than yourself. Paradoxically, the experience of letting go of the self can enrich it by the new skills and achievements;

- **The transformation of time.** Time flies when you're really in the flow, on the other hand it seems to slow down because you are in the moment;

- **Autotelic experience.** When you are in a flow, the task itself is intrinsically rewarding and fulfilling apart from any external rewards.

In order to achieve flow, you have to find a balance between your abilities and the challenge of the task at hand. As Csikszentmihalyi states: “Enjoyment appears at the boundary between boredom and anxiety, when the challenges are just balanced with the

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<sup>16</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, New York 1990, p. 46.

person's capacity to act.”<sup>17</sup> If the task is too difficult for your current skill level, you'll become anxious. If the task is easy and you're good at it, it'll be a relaxing pastime or even boring (see Fig. 6).

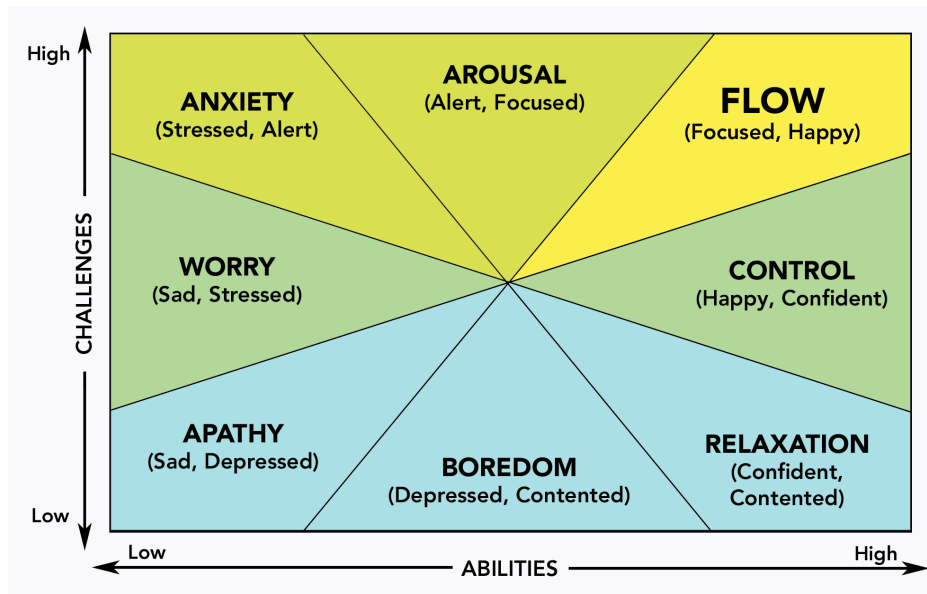


Fig. 6

The whole concept of flow seemed to be a bit paradoxical to me. In order to get into a flow you need focus and concentration, but when you are in a flow the by-product is that you are completely absorbed by the activity. Csikszentmihalyi writes that: “Although the flow experience appears to be effortless, it is far from being so.”<sup>18</sup> So, if I was anxious, what can you do to get into flow? I could either bring the challenge down by setting more realistic goals based on my current skills and/or develop my skills to match the challenge over time. This was what I was already doing with my practice planning in a way, cutting a music piece into doable learning blocks, using variety in my schedule in order to balance the skills and the challenges.

I wanted to change my focus from anxiety to enjoyment. Although I must admit that work isn't always about 'spontaneous joy' and 'being lost in the experience' and achieving things isn't about seeking a joyful bliss all the time. As Csikszentmihalyi stated, joy is a by-product of flow. Therefore, it can never be a primary goal. In my daily practices, I developed my skills when I met challenges and as a result, the inherent anxiety associated with the task that was challenging also decreased. It was the anxiety that was not inherent to the challenge that I needed to do something about. Having a hundred unrelated things competing in my mind for attention, makes it very difficult to work with a sense of flow.

Csikszentmihályi does not include having a clear mind among his main conditions for flow, but that forgetting all the unpleasant aspects of life is a feature of flow. He says

<sup>17</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 52.

<sup>18</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 54.

that flow needs highly disciplined psychological activity, but he doesn't say how this can be achieved. Somehow I was missing a tool here, because I did get the flow during my daily practice, but my anxiety still remained causing me to get out of the flow with unrelated thoughts. For this, I needed to learn more about awareness; that is, being more attentive than being critical or occupied by my negative thoughts.

I found my information about being attentive in one of the self-help books that was used for musicians for a long time, *The Inner Game of Music* by Barry Green and W. Timothy Gallwey. According to Barry Green and Tim Gallwey, the inner game is played out in the arena of your mind, the psychological obstacles. The authors make a distinction between Self-1 and Self-2 as aspects of our thinking. These are just conceptual tools to explain the complexity of the brain and how it works. Self-1 is the critical thinker, the rational, analytical and judgemental self. This self can be thought of as being responsible for thoughts like: "I have to do these instructions perfectly." Self-2 is more the creative and holistic, creating awareness. It's the honest musician who would do a much better job if he or she did not respond to Self-1. In our culture there is much more focus on Self-1. However, in the *Inner Game*, techniques are given that can enable to user to strengthen Self-2, the 'unthinking' state. A state "in which we are relaxed yet aware, and are letting our true ability and musicality express itself, without trying to control and manipulate it."<sup>19</sup> This gave me the insight that I needed to make a choice on what to focus on. In essence, the solution was quite simple. The *Inner Game* book suggests as points of focus to get the performer living in the now: on the instrument, on the sound, on his or her feelings etc. The techniques mentioned in the *Inner Game* can reduce the adverse impact of critical Self-1 and guides you to an ideal state of being: 'relaxed concentration.'<sup>20</sup> This state is actually the flow-state.

Putting all of the information of these two books together, I came up with six conditions that I needed for my daily practice to be flow-like so I could gain some joy out of it:

### **1. Having a clear mind.**

*The Inner Game* suggest that we have to be aware without any judgement. What I did to clear my mind was keeping a second diary, next to the practice diary I used to keep track of my progress. In this second diary, I wrote down all of the thoughts I had making it difficult to practice. Writing all of these thoughts down made it possible for me to get them out of my head, even if it was just for the time being of the practice. When I wrote them down I didn't analyse or judge them, so my Self-1 was heard and became quieter.

### **2. Having a clear goal or outcome.**

By asking myself "Why I am I doing this," I kept my goals clear before I started to practice (see Chapter 1). Additionally, clear goals helped me plan a better daily sched-

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<sup>19</sup> Green, B. and Gallwey, W. T., *The Inner Game of Music*, New York 1986, p. 33.

<sup>20</sup> Green, 1986, p. 35.

ule. When my goals were unclear (especially how to obtain them), it sometimes manifested as a nagging uncertainty about a project/performance, which, ultimately, led to anxiety or procrastination. To obtain a more certain outcome, I broke down my planning in more detail and studied smaller parts of a piece. But most of all, I had to remember why I wanted to be a musician, especially my motivation that was apart from any external rewards. It kept me connected to the bigger picture, my creative side (i.e., Self-2). This has much to do with the autotelic experience Csíkszentmihályi describes. I had to look for the intrinsic rewards and not let myself be guided solely by external rewards. Instead of thinking that I had to become this super successful musician (external reward, Self-1 thoughts), I made the experience (or the process) more my main goal. External goals will still be important to me (e.g., making living and obtaining having success); however, I wanted to do more about the ability to connect again with the feeling of inspiration, the eagerness of learning something new, and the sharing of the joy of music with other musicians when playing together.

### **3. Having a good skill/challenge match.**

This was really a balancing act for me, mostly by trial and error. In the next chapter I will further explain this with my case study *Keren*. It involves appropriate goal setting with smaller learning blocks.

### **4. Getting frequent feedback.**

This condition is connected to the clear goals. When a goal is unclear, it's hard to get the right feedback and to know what to do next. For most, it will be much easier to work on parts of a piece of music with feedback along the way, than to work on the whole piece with no feedback. Getting feedback along the way gave me insights into how I was doing and where I needed to change. To obtain the feedback, I recorded myself regularly.

### **5. Having high physical/mental energy.**

Another thing Csíkszentmihályi does not include is that you need physical and mental energy to get into the flow. It's very difficult to work with a sense of flow or optimal performance when you're not physically or mentally fresh. This is what I also mention in my first chapter. Sleep deprivation is a flow killer. In my first chapter, I already discussed this and the importance of recovery.

### **6. Having a relaxed concentration.**

*The Inner Game* book mentions three fundamental skills, awareness, will, and trust that bring us into relaxed concentration. Awareness is about being fully aware of the sounds and feelings of playing while avoiding self-judgments that could distort a musician's perception. Will is about setting goals, then using the feedback obtained from being aware to reach his or her goals through a process of trial and error. Trust is about letting go of self-judgment and of the physical act of playing and trusting Self-2.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Green, 1986, p. 42-43.

Being in the flow makes you relaxed, but to get there you have to develop a relaxed concentration on the task at hand. My thoughts cannot be wandering all over the place. But my attention also cannot be held too tightly. A balance must be sought: “not too tight, not too loose.” This helpful distinction, and curious paradox again, was totally the opposite of the “no pain, no gain” mentality I mentioned at the beginning of this thesis. Having a relaxed concentration also has got a lot to do with just observing and accepting things as they are, rather than being worried and judgemental all the time.

## CHAPTER III

### Case Study, *Keren* by I. Xenakis

My idea was to pick up a case study on a really difficult piece from the trombone literature, and create a practice schedule that would allow me to perform the piece in a short period of time. As I mentioned in the introduction, I already had the *Keren* piece by Iannis Xenakis in mind for my thesis. It sounded really interesting and I was really looking forward to start working on it. Initially, I planned to practice for only one month before the date of my Master’s presentation. Unfortunately, I misunderstood the deadlines of the Master’s program and the due date for presenting my case study findings for the committee were sooner than my planned *Keren* performance at the Master’s conference in March 2015. Besides that, I only had time in February 2015 because I had other obligations in my life and musical career in the months before, like earning an income (working almost a full time job), a baby on the way, rehearsals, concerts and auditions. Furthermore, I was preparing another trombone concerto to appear as a soloist for an orchestra. In the end, and because of my deadline and planning miscalculation, I only had two weeks to present the case study data for this report paper. Nevertheless, these dates are enough to show the progress I made, the rest will be presented at the Master’s Research Symposium in March 2015.

Since the very beginning of the practice month of *Keren* I was falling back to my usual anxiety issues.

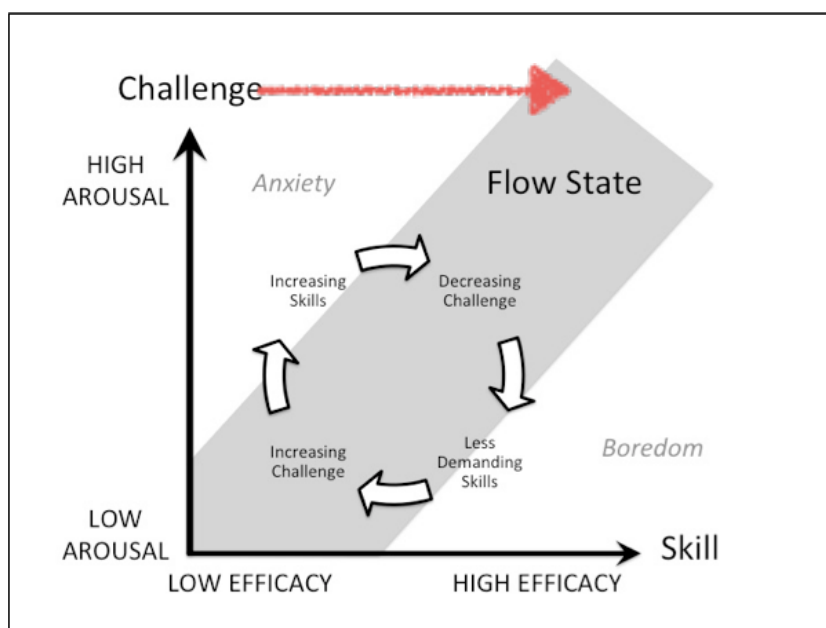
- The goal setting was too big to comprehend in the beginning that I even became afraid of the piece. It became a burden that I created for myself and it honestly felt like the weight of a mountain which, no matter how I tried, I couldn’t lift from my shoulders.
- The piece was slightly above my technical skills and I needed more time to develop the skills needed for the piece. Being able to play in the high register for long is one of them; multi phonics is another one. Xenakis used a really special kind of multi phonics that the player has to sing a lower note that is actually produced by the trombone. This

is quite difficult. Also, at a certain point, I have to sing a low Eb but the problem is that I am not a bass singer. Even after two weeks of practicing these multi phonics, the results were not promising. This made me feel frustrated.

- Deadlines always make me anxious. And instead of focusing on the positive development of my playing, I focussed on my weakness that drained the enjoyment out of my practice.
- My perfectionism was a problem that didn't let me enjoy the music, even when playing the *Keren* piece.

I will explain how I managed my anxiety and gained joy during the first two weeks of practicing this piece in the next part of this chapter. For this, I mainly set the conditions I mentioned in my second chapter: having a clear mind; a goal/outcome; good skill/challenge match; frequent feedback; physical/mental energy; and relaxed concentration. These conditions didn't have to be in an exact order, but planning was the best and most logical thing to start with to have some structure. Accordingly, first I will address the goals and the skill/challenge match.

Before I wanted to start practicing *Keren* in February 2015, I wanted to gain a certain level of technique and confidence in mastering my anxiety and flow in my daily practice. I thought it would be wise to figure out what skills I needed to develop in order to tackle the *Keren* challenge effectively. During my Master's program, I managed to obtain a better skill-challenge balance. Despite this, I still genuinely dreaded the *Keren* piece - like a big mountain I was unable to climb. I was anxious just thinking about the piece. In a way, I was falling back into old habits.



To get from the anxiety level to flow, I had to increase my skills and decrease the challenge (see Fig. 7). In order to do that, I had to have a clear goal in my head. To achieve this goal I started months before with the technical challenges.

Fig. 7. The flow chart.

First, I will address the technical difficulties to explain my starting point and my challenges. *Keren* by Xenakis is one of the most difficult pieces ever composed for the trombone. On the internet, I only found three trombone players who made recordings: Benny Sluchin, Christian Lindberg, and Bruce Collings. On Youtube there are only two more trombone players to be found besides the three I already mentioned. Technical *Keren* is one of the most demanding pieces for trombone. The trombone player has to have an exceptional high and low register and also the ability to move through those registers with ease.

Fig. 8: Example of range, intervals and dynamic changes in *Keren*



Also, the dynamic range of the piece is extreme, instantly changing from PPP to FFF. These kind of dynamic extremes are not normally part of the daily basic routines brass players use to improve their technical skills. In order to be able to perform the extreme dynamics and intervals of *Keren* [fig. xx] later on I had to plan my practice differently and improve several of my own daily routines in order to help me master the technical difficulties.

A normal daily routine exercise to develop the intervals was:

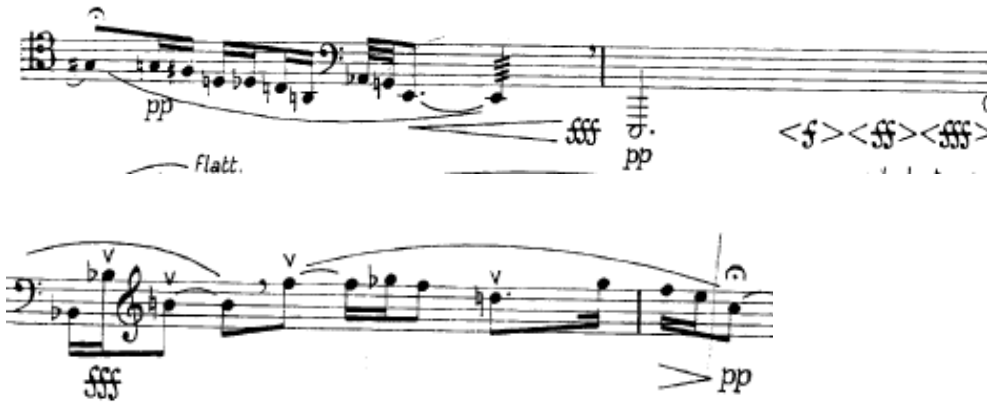


The version I invented to help me with the technical challenges of *Keren* was:



In my own daily practice I tried to combine both dynamic and range expansion in one exercise. The key, dynamics, and rhythmic patterns were also changed each day to keep me sharp during the practice and also to expand my technical skills.

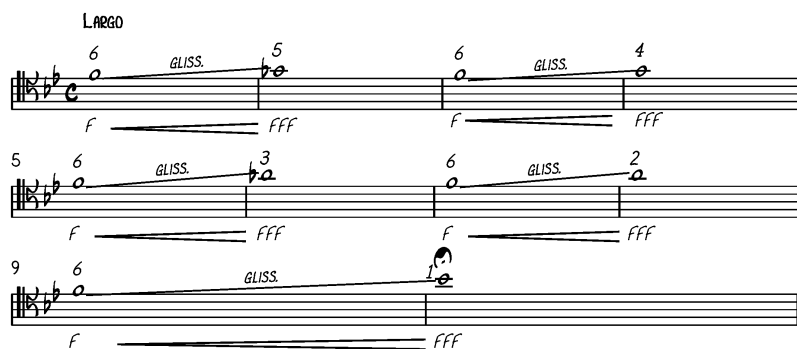
The next demanding parts of *Keren* were these:



In these parts I had to play FFF at the top and bottom end of the range of the trombone. I used an ordinary high register exercise that is taught among trombonists. The only change was that I practiced it with extreme dynamics.

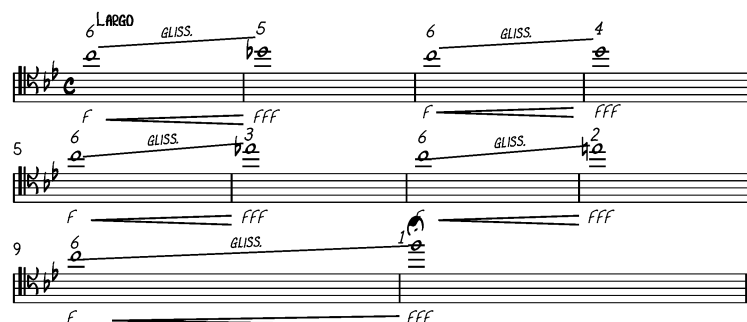
I would start in this range:

### GLISSANDI ETUDES



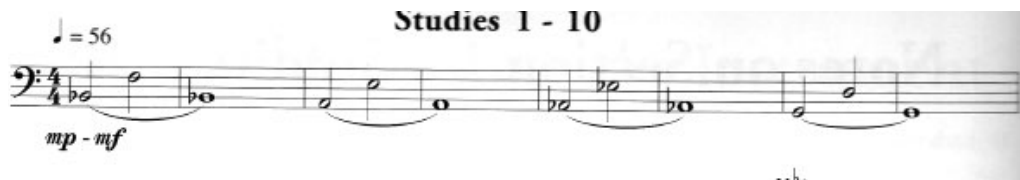
And finish in this range:

### GLISSANDI ETUDES



For the lower end of the range I used a daily routine exercise but combined it with extreme dynamics, from PPP to FFF.

Starting from here:



All the way down:



From E. Klay, *Daily Exercises for Bb/F Trombone*, Balwyn, Vic. 1993.

All of these exercises are preparation for the real challenge which is practicing *Keren*. The main reason for all of this preparation was to gain the extra technical skills I needed for playing the piece. By doing this, I could be more in the flow and make the practice more enjoyable. Another benefit for all this preparation was that all of these technical skills I acquired were useful in my trombone playing. I had started working like this after my 1st year Master's program presentation in the summer of 2014. By the end of 2014, I was feeling ready to start practicing *Keren*. As I mentioned earlier, I already knew my schedule and February 2015 was the month that I could spend time on the piece without too many distractions.

We have a natural tendency when we want to learn something new to start at the beginning, as one reads a book. This was also my approach. But I did it differently for the *Keren* piece. After I got an overview of the *Keren* piece, I cut it into parts or chunks to practice daily (see Appendix). Every day I took a few different parts to practice. These parts are not based on the musical analysis of the piece but are more technically oriented. I planned for each day of the following month on focusing on 2-3 parts depending on how difficult they were. My goal each day was to make them as good as possible, but still keeping in mind to enjoy myself. Also, instead of focusing on what was going wrong, I focused on the positive aspects of my playing. I had made a special calendar just for practicing *Keren* (see Appendix). This calendar, except the smaller parts I had to practice every day, had more entries. I included an enjoyment scale from 1-10, measuring how I felt when I started practicing the parts of *Keren* and how I felt when I finished playing those parts. In the calendar, I had a remark section where I would put any comments I had about the practice session. These remarks were sometimes musical ideas, or just spots that I needed to spend more time practicing in the following weeks.

Applying this technique not only provided variety to my daily practice schedule, but was also beneficial in learning a modern solo with more certainty and confidence. Because I wasn't concerned about the *Keren* as a whole, it made me more relaxed and focused on a single part. By using this approach, I want the *Keren* piece to become more familiar territory and have more time for my musical development.

As I mentioned earlier, having a clear mind, a goal/outcome, good skill/challenge match, frequent feedback, physical/mental energy, relaxed concentration, do not occur in this exact order but rather simultaneously. I didn't want to spend a lot of time creating conditions for future success. Given the planning in the beginning, it turned out to be much more efficient to just start working, and solve problems as they arise. Rather than working on the conditions, I considered how to regain the flow and joy again as problems arose. Any time I lost the flow or joy I would stop and check why this occurred. Mostly, I found it was something lacking in the conditions: Do I have too many thoughts in my head? Is my goal still clear? How am I feeling? What am I focussing on? Am I tired? Am I relaxed? I had to develop an awareness for my inner experience while playing the piece. This kept my skill/challenge match clearer and at the end, it kept me motivated and engaged.

Here are some examples.

- To get my mind more relaxed, I accepted that I was not going to make the deadline. Because of this, I had to adjust my planning. This gave me a huge boost, enabling me to enjoy the piece. I was no longer feeling suffocated. I had more freedom to enjoy the practice of the piece and at the same time the feeling of accomplishment. By the end of the two weeks, I was really happy with the progress I had made and I didn't care so much about the actual performance on stage having to be perfect. It was the process of the gradual shaping of my performance to the ideal that made sense and this was quite rewarding.
- When I was lacking energy I made the decision not to spend my time only on preparing *Keren*, I invested some of the time in rehearsals with a variety of groups. This gave me a really positive feeling and the much needed energy to keep going. Also, during the *Keren* practice I implemented a work/rest rhythm.
- On some occasions, when my perfectionism was getting in the way, my mind was drawn to negative thoughts during the practice: "I am not good enough yet." But when I made the recording I found out that my playing wasn't as bad as I thought it was. Creating the recordings gave me the feeling that I was on the right path. In addition, it provided me with the insight that my negative thoughts were the only thing that kept me distracted from enjoying my practice. Without the recordings, I anticipate that the negative thoughts would linger and I would have kept on trying to figure out what went wrong, overcompensate for the errors I made, and fall into the trap of 'trying' too hard.
- *Keren* was a hard piece of music to practice. At moments, I thought I had made a mistake to use it as a case study for this thesis because *Keren* is made for a solo perfor-

mance and I tend to enjoy and prefer group performances. But using the new approaches and methods, I had positive experiences practicing a solo work. I learned something new, which is also very enjoying.

## Conclusions

I have to admit that I thoroughly enjoyed all of the months that I was working in my practice room with my newly adopted physical and psychological approach to practice. My practice calendar was a constant reminder of what and for how long I should work on my music. Of course, there were days when old habits resurfaced. During those days, I just let myself 'play around' with a musical passage with no planning and let myself go.

By contrast, keeping my mind on the planning, trying to play with others as much as possible, and in general, avoiding focussing on negative thoughts or be too judgmental about my playing helped me keep a more clear mind during my practice sessions and in my performances. As a result of the changes in my learning approach, I had a really good Orchestral examination at the beginning of January 2015 and a successful audition with the Netherlands Camerata.

Although the results are promising, I still need to do a lot of work to change old habits, cope with anxiety, and to keep reminding myself of the joy of playing music. I discovered many great techniques during my research. I believe that applying basic flow principles, combined with "The Inner Game" theory and related approaches for keeping one's awareness in the present, hold much potential for helping musicians play with joy, while also simultaneously improving their practice and performance. I am really looking forward to explore more of these approaches like the Alexander technique and Mindfulness in the future.

I see a lot of professional musicians and also students struggling with the same problems I had: anxiety, boredom, and lack of flow. Musicians play an instrument, they don't work or study it. It would help students if teachers develop an environment that encourages flow feelings and teaches them to recognise flow barriers or triggers like anxiety, overextending themselves with practice, perfectionism, high ambitions or purely focusing on external rewards. Fun and play should be part of the education. I think this paper will be the beginning of a teaching career. It would be my goal as a teacher to address positive emotions and experiences during practice so students can find joy again in the practice room.

# Appendix

Commande de «International Trombone Association»

OUVRAGE PROTÉGÉ  
PHOTOCOPIE INTERDITE  
même partielle  
constituerait une contrefaçon

## KEREN

écrit pour Benny Sluchin

Iannis XENAKIS

1986

pour trombone solo

durée environ 6 mn

$\text{♩} = 42 \text{ MM}$

2

The musical score consists of ten staves. The first staff begins with a *sff* dynamic and a slur. The second staff has a *sff* dynamic and a slur. The third staff includes the instruction *sourd. sèche métallique* and dynamics *pp*, *p*, and *f*. The fourth staff has dynamics *sff*, *pp*, and *ff*. The fifth staff includes the instruction *sans sourd.* and dynamics *sff*, *pp*, and *p*. The sixth staff has a *p* dynamic. The seventh staff has a *p* dynamic. The eighth staff has a *p* dynamic. The ninth staff has a *p* dynamic. The tenth staff has a *sff* dynamic.

12

*p* *fff*

*sourd wa-wa avec tube sorti au maximum*

*p* *f* *pp*

*flatt.*

*fff*

*pp* *fff*

*mp* *f* *pp* *fff*

*sourd. sèche métall.*

*pp* *fff* *p*

14

*sans sourd.*

*mf* *p* *f* *fff* *p*

*pp* *fff* *pp* *p* *fff* *pp*

*pp* *fff* *mf* *pp*

*fff* *pp* *f* *pp* *mf* *pp* *mf* *pp* *pp* *pppp*

*(note la plus grave.)*

## PRACTICE PLAN OF KEREN

	Day/week	Practice Parts	Practice Joy.	Remarks
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 1/ Week 1	1,3,5		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 2/ Week 1	2,4,6		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 3/ Week 1	7,9		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 4/ Week 1	8,10		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 5/Week 1	11		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 6/ Week 1	1-6		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Recovery Day			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 1/ Week 2	1,5,12		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 2/ Week 2	2,4,13		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 3/ Week 2	8,10,14		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 4/ Week 2	6,9,11		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 5/ Week 2	3,7,1		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 6/ Week 2	7-14		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Recovery Day			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 1/ Week 3	14,12		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 2/ Week 3	13,10		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 3/ Week 3	11,9,7		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 4/ Week 3	8,6,4		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 5/ Week 3	5,3,1		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 6/ Week 3	1-14		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Recovery Day			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 1/ Week 4	1,3,5,7,9,11,13		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 2/ Week 4	2,4,6,8,10,12,14		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 3/ Week 4	1-7		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 4/ Week 4	7-14		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 5/ Week 4	1-14		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Day 6/ Week 4	1-14		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Recovery Day			

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