Podcast #3 – How to Guide Students' Practicing
The Music Educator's Crucible

Hello and welcome back to the Music Educator's Crucible. My name is Merlin Thompson and I'm the creator of this podcast series devoted to exploring music and education – in particular topics related to teaching and learning to sing or play a musical instrument. So, if you're a music teacher who teaches private or group lessons - in your own home studio or an institution - you've come to the right place. And I'll also mention that this series has lots to offer schoolteachers, parents, and community leaders as well. So be sure to tune in as often as you like. And a special thank you to pianist Brendan Kinsella for his recording of Mozart's Sonata in B flat major made available courtesy of Musopen. It's much appreciated.

For those of you who don't know me, I'm a classically trained pianist with nearly 40 years studio teaching experience. I've worked with hundreds of students, parents, and teachers across Canada, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Spain, and Great Britain. You can find out more about what I'm up to on my website merlinthompson.com.

For this third episode of The Music Educator's Crucible, I want to take on a perennial favorite with teachers – practicing – because practicing plays an important part in students developing their ability to sing or play a musical instrument. And teachers hope to influence and inspire the way their students practise. Yet, there's an immediate dilemma because teachers typically see their students only once a week and students spend the majority of their time practising on their own at home. It's just not practical or realistic for teachers to go home with their students. Consequently, teachers need effective strategies that help students make connections between their lessons and their home practice. So, what can teachers do?

My plan for this podcast is to tap into three outstanding sources each of which contributes a unique perspective on practicing. The first: Anders Ericsson – the Swedish researcher who devoted his entire career to examining the development of expert performers. The second source: psychologists from the University of Rochester. Edward Deci and Richard Ryan pioneered work in what they call – self-determination theory – delving into motivation. And a third source: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi – the internally renowned social psychologist

whose study of happiness revealed that flow is what makes an experience genuinely satisfying.

My motivation for taking on this topic: a stellar moment from the early years of my own teaching that I'll quickly recap for you. Here's the scene – Six-year-old Ethan – who's been my student for around two years – arrives for his lesson. I inquire – "So Ethan, how did your practice go this week?" Ethan answers confidently, "Great Mr. Thompson! I did everything you asked me to." I continue with a tinge of curiosity – "So, what did you improve?" Ethan's eyebrows vault and his voice follows suit – "Improve!" he exclaims. "You didn't say anything about improving. I thought I was supposed to practice!" Obviously there was work for me to do.

You might say that – Anders Ericsson's career was set in motion by the question of talent. And it's a good question - What comes to mind when you hear the word – talent? Is it exceptional ability? Natural superiority? Unexplainable performance? Our civilization has recognized talented individuals in sports, the arts, and science - at times with awe and wonder - at times with suspicion and envy. Speculations on the reasons for individual's extraordinary abilities are as old as their achievements. Ancient accounts commonly attribute extraordinary performances to everything from divine intervention to satanic possession to supernatural gifts. As time progressed and the influence of scientific inquiry became more prevalent, people accepted that science had the ultimate explanation for talented individuals – it's all about our genes. The characteristics responsible for exceptional performance are innate and are genetically transmitted. Talent is something that's hardwired into our DNA.

Somehow, for Anders Ericsson though, the idea that talent was hardwired into our genes seemed overly simplistic. So, in the early 1990s, he decided to find out what expert performers do to develop their expertise. His idea was to go directly to the source – in this case – violinists and pianists from the Berlin Music Academy that had been identified as exceptional performers. What he discovered would form the basis for his thirty-year odyssey through the hallways of talent. Not surprisingly, Ericsson discovered that every one of these musicians shared a commitment to practising – that almost goes without saying. But what set these individuals apart from others could be measured in terms of the time and characteristics of their practice. Time-wise – an extraordinary number stood out – the investment of at least 10 years. These exceptional performers made commitments to a decade of

rigorous practice and sometimes more. For the characteristics - Ericsson summarized their process under the heading of "deliberate practice" - a long-term activity with several crucial traits. Deliberate practice involves highly structured tasks, optimizes time and energy, relies on constant critical feedback, and focuses on overcoming weaknesses with the explicit goal of improving performance. Ericsson also noted how the effort required in deliberate practice means it is not an inherently enjoyable activity. Individuals are motivated to engage in deliberate practice because such practice improves their performance.

My impression is that deliberate practice resonates with most music teachers – especially those who graduate from a university music program. Deliberate practice starts with entrance audition requirements that most likely take applicants one or more years to adequately prepare. And deliberate practice continues throughout most degrees in response to the demands of multiple juries, solo concerts, and chamber recitals. It's often the only way we can be certain to get everything done. In the process, we get very familiar with deliberate practice.

At the same time, I'm not entirely sold on the idea of deliberate practice for my students – even though I'm thoroughly cognizant of how much it contributed to my own development. The issue for me is the emphasis on expertise – which refers to great skill or knowledge in a particular field. What bothers me is that for most students, expertise doesn't really represent what they're looking for or hope to achieve, not because they're incapable. They're more interested in developing high levels of musical fluency that correspond with their own interests – not an expert's. As an alternative to the extremes of deliberate practice, I prefer to engage my students with moderate amounts of what I call focused practice – For students at all levels, I suggest that brief and consistent amounts of focused work may suffice.

What's inspirational about Ericsson's research is that he breaks through traditional assumptions about talent. He's a researcher who looked at expert performers across all dimensions from chess players to swimmers to tennis players and musicians – and he's shown that high levels of performance aren't limited exclusively to those individuals hardwired for talent. Anybody, each of us - we can all develop our own levels of high performance – a conclusion that takes us beyond the bounds of genetics and opens up the potential for everyone.

At the same time, Ericsson admits there's a weakness to his research in that deliberate practice gives us an idea of what elite performers do, but it doesn't tell us much about what motivates them to continue week after week and year after year. Ericsson has suggested that further analysis of elite performers could address this gap in research. To be honest though – I'm more interested in knowing what ordinary everyday people do when they want to get good at something. Looking at experts has its place – but I'm more curious to find out what drives regular people to stick with something like practicing a musical instrument. As it turns out – that's an excellent segue to our next resource – Edward Deci and Richard Ryan.

Edward Deci and Richard Ryan have known each other and worked together at the University of Rochester for over 40 years. They've produced hundreds of research papers that explore a topic they're both passionate about – motivation. We know that to be motivated means to be moved to do something. Someone energized or activated toward an end is considered motivated, whereas a person who feels no impetus or inspiration to act is typically characterized as unmotivated. We also know motivation has intrinsic and extrinsic varieties – for example – students can be highly motivated to do homework out of internal curiosity and interest, or, alternatively, because they want the external approval of teachers or parents. Edward Deci and Richard Ryan are major game changers when it comes to our understanding of motivation.

Deci got things underway in 1971 with a series of laboratory experiments and field studies that revealed - external rewards actually decrease the individual's intrinsic motivation to complete a given task. Which tells us that if we have to choose between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation – we'll most likely get further with intrinsic motivation. After Ryan joined Deci towards the end of the 1970s, their collaboration soon set off a motivation revolution – all as a result of what they call Self Determination Theory - a practical outline to the inner workings of intrinsic motivation. With Self Determination Theory as their starship, Deci and Ryan proposed that people have three basic or intrinsic needs – the need for autonomy, the need for competence, and the need for relatedness. When these needs are satisfied, we're motivated, productive, and happy; when these needs are thwarted, our motivation, productivity, and happiness plummet. Human beings have an innate drive for self-determination, to be autonomous, and

connect to one another in meaningful ways. When that innate drive is nourished, people achieve more and live richer lives.

So what does all this mean for practicing? When we look at autonomy, competence, and relatedness as cornerstones for practicing – what can teachers anticipate?

Autonomy refers to students' need to feel in charge of and be actively involved in their own learning. Autonomous students practice as an expression of themselves. However, their autonomous practice shouldn't be confused with what independent students do – independent students have no reliance on teachers. Autonomous students depend on teachers to support their practicing by teaching in ways that make strong connections with students' interests and values.

Next - Competence refers to students' need to feel personally effective and confident in their practicing. The need for competence is what leads students to challenge and stimulate their abilities through all kinds of activities. They have their own way of figuring out what's effective and not effective in practicing – and teachers play a major role in guiding students through such explorations.

Finally - Relatedness refers to students' feeling connected to others and that their practicing has meaning for others. Relatedness sheds light on how students' practicing is influenced by parents, peers, the music they listen to at home and with friends, what other students accomplish, along with social media, the internet, entertainment industry.

As cornerstones for practicing, autonomy, competence, and relatedness represent doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, as different from doing something because it leads to an external outcome. Quite unexpectedly – though - I think I have something to add to Deci and Ryan's work. It's a simple thing – really. But when they refer to doing something because it is interesting or enjoyable, I think there's more to it. My impression is that when people are intrinsically motivated - they engage in something because it's personally meaningful to them. It has personal value for them. Of course, that might mean it's interesting or enjoyable; I just want to make sure that we make room for energy, challenge, expression, and letting go as just a few of the reasons behind intrinsic motivation.

By the time Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi reached adolescence, he had a clear picture of what his life interest would be. Growing up in Italy during the Second World War, Csikszentmihalyi was intrigued by how few grownups he knew were able to withstand the tragedies that the war had brought on. From an early age, he was consumed with the question of what makes life worth living. Fast-forward a couple of decades, through moving to the USA, a Ph.D. in psychology, and university appointments, and we find Csikszentmihalyi at the head of a massive research project into happiness. Working with colleagues around the world, his research team interviewed thousands of people from many different walks of life – men and women, young and old – asking them to shed light on the quality of their subjective experiences. The data revealed that people describe their experiences of happiness in very much the same way. They talked about the feeling of flow – the state of mind when things seem to come together. As Csikszentmihalyi's research progressed, his observations of flow produced noteworthy conclusions. For example - How flow occurs when the task undertaken has clear goals and provides immediate feedback. How flow is the result of an effortless involvement that removes the person from the worries and frustrations of daily life. How with flow, there's often a sense that time has been altered, wherein hours pass by in minutes, and minutes can stretch out to seem like hours.

What seems clear to me is that experiences of flow take on an entire array of intensities. How – clear goals and immediate feedback signal concentrated cognitive input – like when you're putting together a piece of Ikea furniture. How - effortless involvement hints at spontaneity and something akin to playing around – like jumping in the pool just to see what happens. How – time being altered may be an indication of letting go or giving in to distraction – like an afternoon spent *people watching* at your favorite cafe. When it comes to flow, we have lots to choose from – and that's a good thing because Csikszentmihalyi pointed out – no person can sustain flow by doing the same thing at the same level for long periods of time. We either grow bored or frustrated, until our desire for flow pushes us to stretch our skills, or discover new opportunities for using them.

I love the way flow connects so easily with practicing and our relationship with music. - How like Ikea furniture assembly – we may use the focused practice I mentioned earlier to get every detail off the score. How like jumping in the pool – practicing may similarly involve

jumping into your piece just to see what happens. And people watching? Consider all the times practicing includes free-form wanderings through familiar and unfamiliar pieces for the sole purpose of leaving the world behind. Practicing has many intensities of flow, just like our relationship with music – which at times pulls us to jump up and dance, moves us to tears, or takes us to another place entirely. All this shouldn't be surprising, given that practicing isn't something separate that we do on its own. Practicing is what we do because of our relationship with music.

There's also something uncanny about how this exploration of flow parallels an article on practicing I read in the early 1990s. The article, from a major international music journal, was written by an esteemed performer and music professor - He described his practicing as a child in terms of – improvising, fiddling, noodling, composing, sightreading, anything and everything until his Mother shouted from somewhere in the house about getting back on track. Now, I don't really have any memories of my own practicing as a child. But, when I read this author's account – I couldn't help think that's what my practicing most likely looked like. And after reading Csikszentmihalyi's research on flow, I could understand why. No one can sustain practicing by doing the same thing at the same level for long periods of time. Which means focused practice can only last so long before it's time to test things out or play around to lighten the load. Which might lead to important discoveries that prompt a return to focused practice – which can only last so long – and so we end up with a cyclical model of practicing that's organized yet spontaneous at the same time. We give flow our best shot in practicing – because on a deeply basic human level, there's something very attractive about the feeling of things when they come together. So - We try out: focused practice, playing around, and letting things go - because all of them have meaning for our relationship with music.

Here's another story from my teaching studio – this one takes place about a decade after my six-year-old student Ethan's story from the beginning of this podcast.

Davis was the fourth of five children in his family to take piano lessons with me. He was also the fourth of five children to embrace his entire family's passion for hockey. After six years of lessons, as Davis entered junior high, I wasn't surprised when he informed me that his hockey training and games schedule would severely curtail his time at the piano. What could I do to guide his practice? My advice was -

"Please don't work hard. If you think you need to work hard, choose something small and limit yourself to 5 or 10 minutes maximum." I advised.

My priority was to support Davis. To assure him that he could be successful in spite of the obstacles. Small amounts of focused practice would help – but above anything else – I trusted that the strength and meaning of his relationship with music would keep things going just fine. Over the next four years as Davis explored pieces from Beethoven to Cold Play to an intermediate piano exam, the advice during hockey season never wavered. "Please don't work hard" became our shared mantra. Knowing that the minute hockey season was finished – we'd be jumping back to the challenges Davis had grown accustomed to. When a hockey team in another city drafted him at age 18, Davis tracked down a billeting home with a piano and soon after emailed me an unexpected improvisation – His own variations on Beethoven's Fur Elise.

My goal for this podcast has been to tap into the research of Anders Ericsson, Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi – three unique perspectives on practicing that include **deliberate** practice – which I think is more useful as focused practice, along with self-determination and flow. So a good question at this point might be – how do I measure the success of my students' practicing? And the short answer for me is – musical excellence. When it comes to the long answer – well… you can probably see where I'm going with this – I'm looking for musical excellence and its relationship with focused practice, self-determination, and flow. To give it a metaphorical spin, for me successful student practicing is a team event where focused practice, self-determination, and flow are players on team musical excellence. I emphasize team event because all three aspects play a vital role in achieving musical excellence. As teachers, we depend on focused practice to achieve musical excellence. And students naturally gravitate to self-determination and flow as tools for practice. So it makes sense to bring them all together on the same team.

The problem is that focused practice and musical excellence have basically had a very exclusive relationship for years. And because focused practice works – in the sense that it may produce good results – teachers have had little reason to think about self-determination or flow. But I worry about over-relying on focused practice. Things like practicing every piece every day with the metronome, parents monitoring all details of students' practice, staying on one piece for

years – thinking that students can't possibly go on to the next – these things cause me concern because here success seems to be largely about micromanaging students' practicing. What I really appreciate is how this team approach to student practicing helps me to avoid the pitfalls of focused practice.

For me, focused practice, self-determination, and flow are like whistleblowers that constantly call each other out when any one of them is getting too much or too little attention. They're like spotlights that keep me focused on the diverse aspects of practicing that contribute to students' success. So I make sure that practicing satisfies students' innate drive for autonomy, to be competent, and connect with others in meaningful ways. I include moderate amounts of focused practice, recognizing that it works best when paired with playing around, and letting go. And finally – I remain fully aware of what doing the same thing at the same level for long periods of time leads to.

So I think I'll wrap up this exploration with a nod of gratitude to Ericsson, Deci, Ryan, and Csikszentmihalyi – and acknowledge the amazing impact of their research on how teachers may guide their students' practicing. To close things off - I leave you with a question this time around – How do you measure the success of your students' practicing? No doubt that'll keep things churning for a while.

Until the next time – thanks for listening – This is the Music Educator's Crucible and I'm Merlin Thompson. Cheers!