



**ACADEMY OF MUSIC AND DRAMA**

*Out of the practise room*

*Planning patterns for professional musicians-to-be*

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## **Abstract**

The present work is about how it is possible to organise the practising activity from the perspective of a viola player. It may be a tool for understanding how to balance different loads of practise and rest for young musicians who aim to a professional career. A selection of examples of ways of personal experiences in planning practising activities and their analysis are the core of the first chapter of this project. The material was collected during the second and third semester of the master in symphonic orchestra performance at the Academy of music and drama in Gothenburg. The second chapter follows the process of preparation of the simulation of an audition - as part of the master programme at the academy - during the three weeks before the performance. The practising activity is documented through samples of recordings of the practising sessions. In the following chapter the focus is on the previous research on the subject of planning practising activities carried out by the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki. From there I compare the methods and give space to new outcomes. The last chapter is about the role that self-awareness and concentration have for me when it comes to dealing with practising activities and their planning.

## **Key words**

Practising music; time management; patterns; physical activity; rest; loading period; consolidation; performance; reactivation period; self-awareness;

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## Background

I am a classic viola player and my project is within the context of symphony orchestra playing. The idea of writing my independent project on how I plan and organise my practising activities was probably the first which crossed my mind when I had to choose a subject, nevertheless it was not the topic I actually chose. My first semester I decided I would analyse excerpts and ways to practise them consistently for preparing auditions. It was an interesting field for me as musician and a practical tool to reflect on technique and interpretation issues, while practising the excerpts. However, after a few weeks, I was still analysing ways of practising excerpts which are part of our standard repertoire, but which were not what I was practising at that very moment. Therefore the motivation for keeping my project going was lacking.

By chance, it happened to speak with some colleagues of the master about how we deal with practise organisation. I briefly explained that I have a plan consisting mainly in the alternation of different days through different weeks and that I had figured it out for myself, finding inspiration in the world of professional sports. One of my colleagues asked me if it was the subject of my independent project. I answered that of course it could not be, since it was something interesting and probably useful, but too personal to be chosen as subject for a master thesis. Nevertheless, the interest of my colleagues and the lack of motivation for my actual project at that moment gave me the opportunity to reflect on what I was doing. I understood that writing on my ways of organising practise activities was the possibility to analyse something that I was already working on and at the same time a chance to write on a subject that may be helpful for other musicians.

The inspiration I got from the world of professional sports came from friends. Their training, organisation and schedules have always been interesting to me, since they knew what and how they had to train every single day. My interest became questions and from the answers I got some ideas to shape flexible planning patterns for my activity as musician.

## **Introduction - From the idea to the project**

How is it possible to plan our practising time in daily, weekly and monthly perspectives of alternation of efforts and rests and therefore to know what we need to do and how much we need to practise and when and for how long we need to rest to be at our best in performances? Practising activities need a plan in any case. But for me here it comes the possibility to understand how I can balance efforts and rests from a daily to a monthly (or wider) point of view.

This question has always been in my mind and after a few years of experiments in the field, I have taken the opportunity of this project to give a shape to my discoveries and to read more about the subject.

This work is about planning the practising time, especially focusing on the alternation of practise time with my instrument and periods of rest, in combination with physical activity and training self-awareness and concentration.

This investigation gave insight into my project-question, so that it is easier now to detect what I need and how I need to plan my practise and to actualise it. The daily reflection is where the knowledge about myself comes from and, though most of the daily track of practising activities through the months is not reported here, it is important to consider this day-by-day activity of self-reflection in order to understand the nature of this work. This project is about what and how I organise out of the practise room, so that the time I spend in it can be as efficient as possible. The occasional looking into technical aspects of the actual practise (Chapter 2) is due to the need of showing the link between the planning and what actually happens one a due day of practise; in this perspective, the recordings are examples of outcomes of the practise.

About three years ago I started planning practising activities weekly: The main point of this organisation plan was to keep it simple and functional for me, and to alternate

different kinds of workload for each day. Through the months my plan evolved into something deeply connected to the development of my way of practising.

The period of the examples selected for this project goes from Autumn 2018 until Spring 2019 and then three weeks during Autumn 2019.

### **The role of the experiments**

The basic idea behind this project is that in the past I needed to schedule an alternation of rests and work in order not to feel guilty when I did not practise. The aim is now to practise as much as I can stand and not more and prepare as much as possible, finding out my physical and psychological limits. For example, I see that my brain tends to confuse my being upset with the need of taking some time off from my practising. I experienced that it is possible to practise mentally without the instrument in moments where I was recovering from sickness. The fact of not being able to play is then not affecting the practise itself, since I am practising in other ways. I awaken my curiosity and creativity, thus giving new inspiration to my whole musical knowledge, where the actual instrumental practise is a fundamental, but only partial side.

My experiments about planning of practising activities started when I recognised that my daily work with the instrument could not consist of just taking a perceived good day of practise and trusting that such a “good” day of work could simply be repeated on any other day. I was able to notice that there were days, weeks or periods when I worked very well, when I was focused and the musical or technical issues on which I was working were actually improving. But to this corresponded some other days on which I could not concentrate very well and practise in what I consider a good way, I couldn't get satisfaction and amusement from my playing music. I believe that this is not so much a matter of how the environment or physical or psychological fluctuations influence the quality of my work, but rather a matter of how we deal with the relationship between effort and recovering from effort.



The parallel world of professional sports was a fascinating field for me and a source of inspiration for both my method and self-knowledge. My question was: If professional athletes have a schedule for their training, including the preparation for races and the overview of the season, why don't we musicians have the same? Why haven't we got a coach? Sometimes a teacher in our field takes on some technical or motivational aspects, which of course is a very good thing. But concerning organisation itself we are mainly left on our own. This gives us the possibility to organise and decide things on our own, but we also can feel lost sometimes.

This project is for me the possibility to combine suggestions and experiences and to turn them into a resource of knowledge. They are the core of this work and will be a grounding helping resource for my future as well.

### **Method and content of the work**

During the second and third semester of my master I documented week by week the organisation of practising patterns I used. Collecting many examples gave me the possibility to pick up a few significant ones and to describe those patterns in detail (Chapter 1).

These examples are significant as they fall apart into perceived good organisation patterns and perceived bad ones. For this reason, having a closer look into them gives me an opportunity to analyse what I can learn from these different experiences after the few months they occurred.

The second chapter is about documenting planning of my practising sessions during the three weeks (week 45 to 48 2019) of preparation of the excerpts for the simulation of audition in the academy. The diagram of the practise for the whole three weeks is reported, while some samples of organisation for specific days are analysed. The preparation is accompanied by recordings of parts of the practise sessions of the days taken into account.

I compare the outcomes of my investigation and experiments with academic studies on the subject of planning practise time from the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki in the third chapter. The focus is on what previous scientific research can give to my ongoing process of growth.

I felt the need to add a further chapter for introducing the role that the parallel activity of daily meditation had during the months I worked on this project. The idea of putting this additional chapter came when I understood that not only my playing in, but also the relationship with the planning of my practise out of the practise room as musician was being shaped by creating daily moments of silence. From January to October 2019 I followed an online meditation course with Jackie Readon, a coach I met during a workshop in the academy in December 2018. After a career in the professional tennis field, Jackie is now coach for professional athletes and musicians. *The inner game of Tennis* by Timothy Gallwey is a source I use to compare and analyse my path of self-awareness through meditation with what the books proposes as examples on the subject.

## **Theory**

The section about “practise” of the website of the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki is used as source to compare the outcomes of my own investigation. Aware of the number of publications on the subject, I choose here one reference in the studies of the researchers of the Sibelius Academy to have the opportunity to look closely into similarities and different outcomes.

*The inner game of Tennis* by Timothy Gallwey is part of the theory I read while writing this project. The role of this book in the present work is to support and give insight to the discoveries I went through during the process of practising self-awareness and concentration. Though the book deals with some technical aspects about the game of tennis (in relationship with the techniques of concentration), it is in its focus on the “inner” part that it is here quoted and analysed.

## Diagrams, terms and symbols

The diagrams are a graphical representation of the different periods of practising patterns.

1) Loading week/period = building new repertoire, technique. This period can consist of days, up to three weeks. The line in the diagram is going up.

2) Consolidation week/period = the already-practised repertoire either can be put aside for the time, or I can use a variety of ways of practising to develop my knowledge of it. The line is flat.

3) Performance week/days = orchestra weeks, auditions (and travels), performances. No fixed patterns. The line is thicker and continues, beginning at the end of the consolidation period.

4) Reactivation period = change order and priorities within the pattern, in order to renew and take new energy. The line goes down.

Complementary to these diagrams I figured out another one (see Chapter 3, figure 6). It takes into account the physical activity in combination with the practising pattern. The diagram basically shows an inverse pattern, compared to the others. This diagram is a standard one that I developed to have a clearer idea of the amount of physical activity that can be good for me to carry out during different periods of practise. In October 2016 I began to do daily stretching exercises before starting my practise with the viola. The asymmetrical nature of our instrument made me aware of the need of doing physical activity which could, day by day, reset my body and strengthen it. That is why I put stretching exercises as part of my daily practise before approaching the instrument. Thinking of my daily organisation I could see that I needed to choose a physical activity to balance out the practising sessions with the instrument (asymmetrical posture). In August 2019 I started to run (from 8 minutes increasing up to 40-50 minutes during the first 5 weeks, and then keeping it constant). These are the

physical activities I refer to when I speak about in this work. Running as exercise started as an attempt to balance the asymmetrical nature of the instrument and it ended up being the complement of the whole practise patterns (see Chapter 3, figure 6).

In describing the organisation of practise patterns I use terms and symbols I devised for my daily use.

H = a half day of practise (only morning or afternoon or evening), in average 2/3 per week.

F = a full day of practise (both morning and afternoon or evening), in average 2/3 per week.

*Magic* = a day where it is possible to do whatever needed, in average one per week.

A = a day of rest, in average 3 or 4 per month.

## Chapter 1 - A closer look into practical examples

### *Example 1: week 42 to week 46 2018 – what happened*

This first example pattern has been chosen as it represents a period of extreme workload in terms of practise, performance and travel time. Looking back, it was completely unhealthy to take such a heavy load of work and preparation, but on the other hand I can remember and I still agree that it was the only option for that period. Speaking in terms of organisation of the practising activities, week 42 is the end of a preparation period for the auditions coming in the two following weeks. Week 43 and 44 are a long period of performances for concerts and auditions.

The choice of taking two days off at the end of week 44 is aimed to enable reactivation from the effort of the previous weeks. When the new loading period starts at the beginning of week 45, the practising time is used to learn the repertoire for the upcoming orchestra project at school, scheduled for week 46. The amount of new repertoire to practise leads to full days of long practise sessions, with short breaks in between different phases of the practise. Since the amount of practise during week 45 has been heavy, two days off at the end are an attempt of enabling reactivation, even if there is not enough time for a proper reactivation period. Starting on Monday with the orchestra project comes a new sudden work load. Week 46 feels therefore like one of the most difficult and heaviest in my experience. The programme is actually challenging (Bartók *Concerto for orchestra*, Strauss *Don Juan* and Mozart *Concerto for flute and harp*).

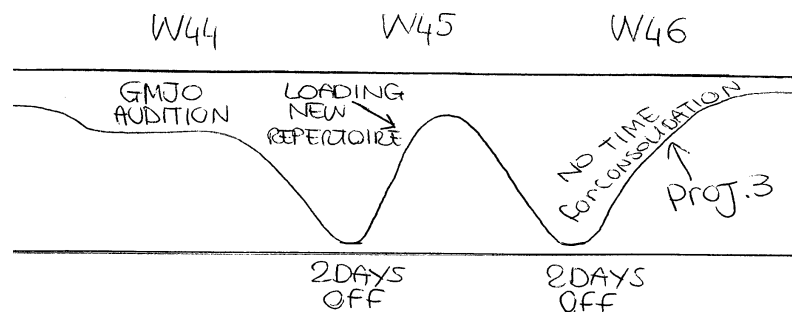


Figure 1

The diagram shows the pattern of organisation of the practise during the three weeks taken into account. The attempt of recovering (taking two days off for two weeks in a row) from previous weeks of heavy loading and performances does not work as a real reactivation period. It just enables me to go through the last week, which feels heavier than it could have because I had no time for a consolidation period for the new repertoire. From this example I understood the importance of the reactivation and consolidation periods in a deeper level.

***Discoveries and reactions*** It is during the preparation of new repertoire in week 45 that I begin to understand the importance of being focused while practising. I have always been aware of that, but having only a few days to learn new challenging repertoire makes me understand that higher standards of concentration are required. There is no space for off-topic thoughts interfering with the practise. In the following weeks I start the actual course of meditation and concentration (see Introduction and Chapter 4).

When week 46 comes, I am not mentally and physically ready for it, since I have not given a proper time for consolidation to my brain and body. Moreover it feels even more complicated to cope with the management of the time for keeping practising such a demanding repertoire in that period, since all the experiences and experiments with body preparation, concentration practise and organisation patterns are in progress or have not started yet.

If I compare this period to the same one in 2019, the amount of load is similar, but the effort that every rehearsal needs is less, because the mind is focused. Now I also have examples from the past, to understand how my body reacts to different circumstances; this helps me in understanding better and sooner the actual technical issues in the different programmes. It also helps in having a wider look at the organisation of different activities, before the work load becomes too heavy.

**Example 2: week 48 to week 51 2018 – what happened**

Just after the very intense period described in the first example comes an interesting example of how rest and reactivation periods enable the body and the mind to get the necessary recovery and the new energy to start and build a process towards new performances. Both week 48 and 49 are reserved for rest and reactivation; There is only a short loading period at the end of which there is a viola lesson (at the end of week 49) performing all the excerpts for the upcoming mock audition. A mock audition is a simulation of a real one, where students of the academy prepare and perform excerpts for a jury of teachers. We get the excerpts three week before our exam. At the beginning of week 50 another reactivation period starts. Eventually a second loading period starts during the second half of week 50.

During week 50 a consolidation period follows the second re-load. The performance of the excerpts for the mock audition is on Monday in week 51.

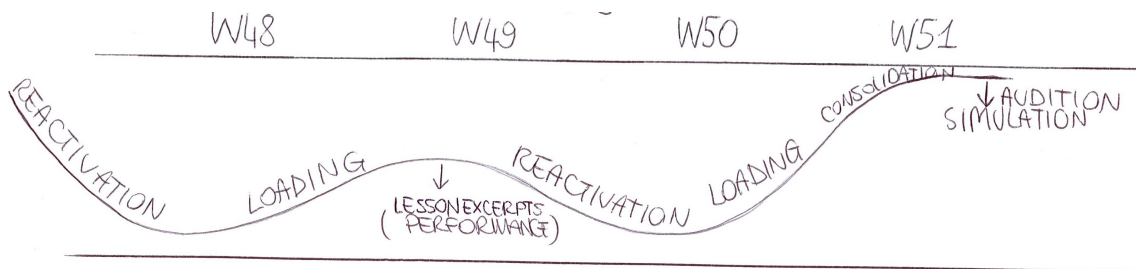


Figure 2

In this diagram the first reactivation and loading periods are followed by a performance (lesson), which is only at half way in the diagram. It is a small performance (short and simulating a simulation, where less stress is involved).

**Discoveries and reactions** Reactivating and loading a second time within two weeks is a strategy that I find now extremely useful, but that I discovered from the direct experience and almost by chance. The preparation goes on much easier if a second period of reactivation is allowed. It is thus possible to load at the maximum. The days for consolidation before the performance in the mock audition complete a whole balanced process of preparation. The ongoing opera orchestra project in week 48, 49

and 50 does not affect the the whole process of preparation, since it is a lighter one, where fewer violas are needed and we can rotate and not attend all rehearsals and performances.

Thinking back to this performance in the mock audition in week 51, I see it now as a new beginning in the perception of myself during performances. I had met a few days before the person who would become my coach for concentration, self-awareness and meditation for the next 10 months (see Chapter 4).

**Example 3: week 7 to week 9 2019 – what happened**

The period considered is the three weeks of preparation for the mock audition with opera excerpts during Spring 2019. All excerpts are totally new for me and besides there are many other activities going on at the same time. The repertoire to prepare is wide and the excerpts for the mock are published some days before the beginning of the orchestra week. The need to prepare different and new repertoire for concerts and auditions happening close to each other is an experience that had occurred before. Nevertheless this example gives insight into the organisation of the practise, where the new repertoire (in this case the excerpts for the mock audition) has to be included in the daily rotation of different programmes in the practising activities, from the very first moment (of availability of the programme and of the scores).

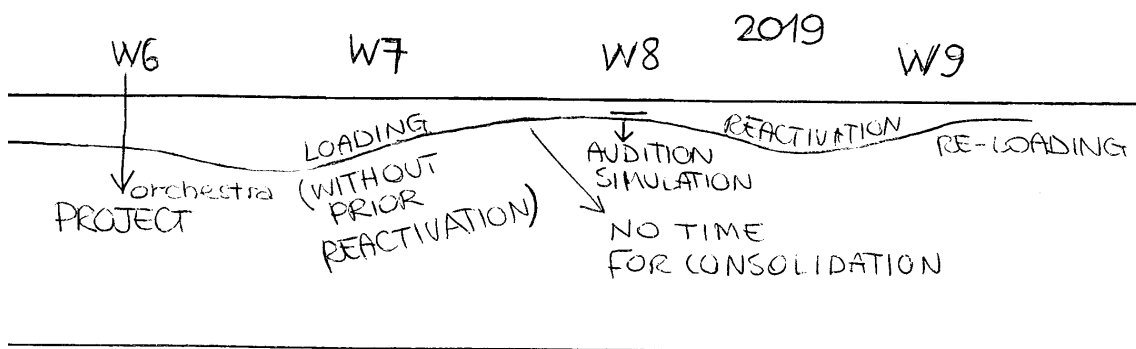


Figure 3



The weeks analysed in the text are graphically reported in the diagram above. In this specific case the days of loading during week 7 are a too short period to learn new repertoire. The pressure of not having enough time to learn the new excerpts leads to an attempt of practising as much as possible with the instrument, when it is already late and thus not to giving room to reactivation (before) and consolidation (after) to the repertoire. This example is about the ability of learning from perceived bad experiences and turn them into new starts and possibilities to develop deeper awareness.

*Discoveries and reactions* What I learn in this specific situation is that the time for consolidation is extremely vital, especially when I am learning new repertoire. During the weeks considered in this example, I start too late with the loading of the new excerpts, thus not giving a proper space to consolidation.

I pass the mock, but I perceive it as a bad performance. Nevertheless, I decide, quite soon and with lucidity, that I have to take it as an occasion to grow and develop further. There is probably something I can do more and better. I understand that it is possible to start practising with the instrument even when I am still looking for the excerpts in the recordings or in the score, at least to figure out the fingerings and physically to get a general idea. This could have been probably a good possibility for the preparation of this mock audition, especially since all repertoire was new.

This specific experience makes me think of how I use the time I have and if I am actually using it in the best way. It brings insight into my own way of organising the practise as well: Planning is good as long as it allows a better management of the time in the practise room, not if it takes over the time for practising. I realise that planning activities can be used by my brain as an excuse to postpone practise. Especially when I am under pressure because I need to prepare different repertoire for performances occurring during the same week, I realise that I experience anxiety and I am blocked, for not knowing what to prioritise. In those situations the planning of the practise acts as a temporary solution to the difficulty of choosing how and with what to start and actually to practise. The rotation of the different repertoire during the same practise session – using a timer (set every 10 or 15 minutes) in order to know when to go to the

next piece – is a practical solution to this issue. In this fashion all the repertoire is given time of practise and of rest, thus having the chance to grow and be consolidated.

**Example 4: week 12 to week 14-15 – what happened**

This example is chosen to underline the role of rest days after an effort and the importance of the quality of the days off to recharge the energy before a new loading period begins. Week 12 ends with a performance and it is followed by two days off. Week 13 is the start of a new loading period, just before leaving for Germany (at the end week 14 and through week 15) for an orchestra project. The weeks in Germany are full days of rehearsals, individual practise for both the ongoing project (consolidation) and the one to come (loading) and travels.

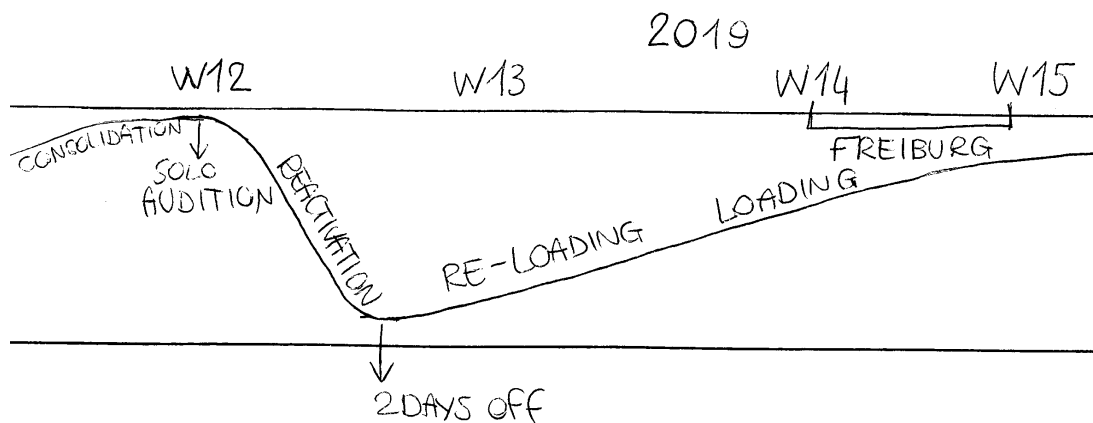


Figure 4

The diagram above shows the practise patterns for the weeks described in the text. The two days off and the long loading period during week 13 and 14 enable a good shape for the performances and the quality of the practise during the orchestra days.

**Discoveries and reactions** Spending a weekend off in my home country provides me with the opportunity to meet people and to go to places I had not visited for a long time. This specific experience of good quality of time off is reported here because it represents for me the first situation of rest where I realised that not all days of rest are the same. Spending time with people or in the open air on a rest day gives a totally

different impact on the rest itself if compared with a day without practising, but full of thoughts or worries.

I recharge my energy and I get ready for the following weeks. Even though the days during the project in Germany are long, I am full of energy and I am willing to learn and improve. Looking at the diagrams I can say that probably it was possible to be in shape thanks to both longer loading periods (both before the performance at the end of week 12 and before Germany) and to the good quality of the free days. The physical activity carried out in these weeks is balanced too. It is in this period that I figure out the diagram of the inverse patterns for practise and physical activity (see Chapter 3).

## **Chapter 2 - A new chance (week 45 to week 48 2019)**

### **Preparing excerpts: different practise for different days and periods**

Concerning the activities described in the days reported here, I normally choose what to practise by briefly sketching it the day before, at least in my mind. I therefore arrive to the practise room already with an idea of what I want to do and how. Then it happens that ideas come during the practise and I adapt my draft. The isolated cases of spontaneous practise are also reported. The aim of planning the practising activities is to have a clear idea of what and how to practise. It is also a tool to be aware of the single day of practise (and its workload) in relationship to the previous and following ones. Besides, it is of vital importance for me that this plan is flexible, so that it is actually useful and it does not become a cage for the sake of organisation.

The three weeks period considered here is the time used for the preparation of the mock audition and to finalise the preparation of an audition in Brussels. The aim is to keep rotating among the excerpts to prepare for the audition, while building the repertoire for the mock. When there are performances of the programme of the audition in the lessons, I practise less or just spots of the repertoire for the mock, so it goes on, but does not interfere too much with the prior goal at the moment (total concentration on the performance of the audition).

After the actual audition, the focus for the organisation of the practise for the mock is on reactivating energy after the performance stress and on building micro-cycles of loading-consolidation-performance -reactivation. This is needed, since I have three pre-performances of the repertoire of the mock organised during the days before it. Having proper micro-cycles is then of fundamental importance to avoid exhaustion at the moment of the actual performance.

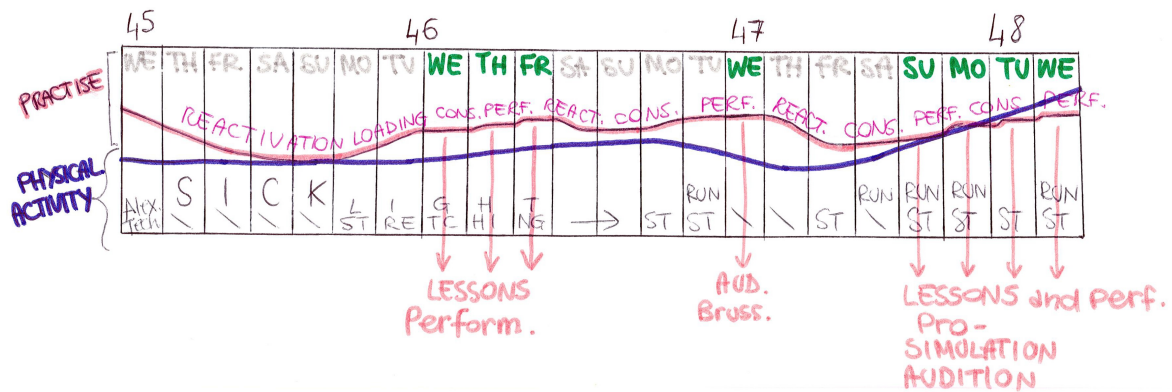


Figure 5 – Three weeks preparation. Double diagram of the organisation patterns where practise and physical activity are shown.

### From the plan to the recordings of the practise

**Example 1: Monday week 46, F. Mendelssohn, excerpt from A Midsummer Night's Dream (scherzo)**

The practise session on this excerpt (the only common excerpt for both the audition and the mock) is carried out in the afternoon. It is the first day of orchestra week. The practise session is based on going through all the excerpts for the audition in Brussels, playing slowly and picking up only a few spots of them (see recordings *Monday week 46 Mendelssohn 1, 2, 3*). The following description of the content of the practise is mentioned here to introduce the recordings and why I selected them. The challenge of the practise session is to work on details, mainly with the help of the metronome.

**What I actually did** This excerpt is one of the most frequently asked in auditions for its *p* and *pp* dynamics, which need to be carried out with a particular bow stroke where the bow slightly jumps itself, as a result of the combination of the choice of the exact part of the bow, contact with the string and distance from the bridge. I have been working a lot on this bow stroke and I need now to shape it into the phrase, so that the sparkling sound of the bow stroke actually expresses the nature of the *Scherzo*. I try to figure out what I want from specific bars or notes from a musical perspective and how to make it clear for the listener. Listening to the recordings I notice that at that stage of

preparation I am still concerned with keeping the pulse. Especially in the part recorded where trills and the hemiola occur, I practise with the metronome and without the trills and I only add them after a while, while also increasing the speed somewhat. I begin to experience being more at ease playing out the enthusiasm I feel for the whole process of preparation and for the music itself. The focus is on having fun while playing and on finding ways to be communicative.

Focusing on small details during an afternoon practise session after an orchestra day is an option for me to keep high standard of concentration, but not to push the body with playing through the programme.



Score 1 – F. Mendelssohn, excerpt from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (scherzo) bar 280-296 (recordings Monday week 46 Mendelssohn 1, 2, 3).<sup>1</sup>

**Example 2: Tuesday week 46, Run through excerpts for Brussels audition**

Here is an example of a different way of managing the time for practising activities during a day of orchestra week. Before the morning rehearsals I play through all the five excerpts for the audition in Brussels, scheduled for Wednesday morning in week 47 (see recordings Tuesday week 46 run through excerpts Brussels, 6 recordings). Except from the excerpt taken from Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (scherzo) -

<sup>1</sup> Scan of the excerpts for the mock audition (Mock Opera Excerpts n.6 – viola) published in Canvas Student (November 2019).

where I don't find the right concentration during the second part - and the last part of the second excerpt from Brahms' *Variations on a theme by Haydn (var. VIII, 2 recordings)*, I can play everything keeping my concentration where I need to. The experiment for the day is to perform all the excerpts just after a short warm up and without having looked at them earlier during the day. It is hard to find time to practise with a fresh mind during the orchestra weeks and this morning experiment is a way to use at best the time I have. Among the feelings and reactions after recording the run through, I experience as particularly instructive getting to know how it feels to perform excerpts after warming up, at almost the same time of the real audition. I can also detect what is not stable enough for performance and get new clues for further practise.

***Example 3: Saturday week 46, A. Berg, excerpt from Wozzeck (end act 1)***

As a day in between the two concerts of the orchestra week (on Friday and on Sunday), on Saturday the goal is to get a general idea of the new excerpt by Berg, to choose fingerings and to experience how precise I can be in following the dynamics and articulation marks (see recordings *Saturday week 46 Berg 1 to 8*). I see the challenge of the excerpt in its being short and requiring power and extreme rhythmical precision.

***What I practically did*** This excerpt is not a standard one, but its being short and full of details in the dynamics and marks in general makes it an useful example to approach the music of Berg and its time. The main goal with this excerpt is to exaggerate every detail, being always aware if the part I am playing belongs to the main (H for *Hauptstimme*) voice or if it is just a complementary one (N for *Nebenstimme*). With this excerpt I work backwards, from the end of the phrase to the beginning; it is a method of practising excerpts that I learnt from my previous teachers. It is useful for getting a stronger and more solid feeling of the rhythm. The focus is on each sound and at the same time on its relationship with the previous one. The meaning of the musical phrase is built backwards; in other words, this way of practising forces the

musician to give meaning to all notes. I like this music, but I have not direct experience of it. Aware that listening or playing along with recordings of an opera is not enough to get the feeling of it, I use this method of practising, thus trying to get closer to the music and to the marks the composer put in the score. After a few takes of the first bar backwards, I check it with metronome and play it as it is written as well (not backwards). I then increase the speed and gradually add new bars. Then I play without the metronome.



Score 2 – A. Berg, excerpt from *Wozzeck* (end act 1) bar 707-711 (recordings *Saturday week 46 Berg 1 to 8*).<sup>2</sup>

**Example 4: Friday week 47, R. Wagner, excerpt from *Tannhäuser* (act 1)**

Friday is the day after the travel back to Gothenburg after the audition in Brussels. The planning of the practising activities is to take a day off, for allowing both a mental and a physical reactivation. Nevertheless, in the evening I take a short and unplanned, but really productive practise session, since I feel inspired after having been to the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra concert. I mainly set the fingerings and get the

<sup>2</sup> Scan of the excerpts for the mock audition (Mock Opera Excerpts n.6 – viola) published in *Canvas Student* (November 2019).



global idea for some parts of the new excerpts that I had still not practised. These are from Wagner's *Tannhäuser* (see recordings *Friday week 47 Wagner 6 to 11*). The goal is to get the best possible overview on the excerpt, so that the evening session can work as time for getting ideas and inspiration and continue the work on it during the following day. It is not then about starting something on the following morning, but a continuation of the practise, with the benefit of a night sleep in between.

***What I practically did*** This excerpt is fast, practically always *ff* and develops from the lower register of the instrument to the middle-high one. Therefore my care is to find fingerings giving stability to the left hand and to choose how I distribute the quantity and the speed of the bow, so that every note, even if belonging to long slurs, is given articulation. For the ending part of the excerpt, I try different combinations of dynamics and articulation; I practise and record the bow pattern with open strings, so that the bow knows exactly where to go and so the left hand gets support from the right knowing where it is going; The left hand can then focus on the pattern of the fingers. In the following recordings, I go to the beginning of the excerpt and I practise slowly, to understand if the fingerings I chose are comfortable for the hand. Then I increase the speed and check if the fingerings are still working. The last recording (*Wagner 11*) is a sample of practise for the chromatic scale in the middle part of the excerpt, from a slow tempo to set the intonation to a little faster tempo. The excerpt will be fast eventually, but I choose slow tempos for the first day of practise, to allow the fingers to get used to the fingerings and to the patterns. This is a part of the loading process.

(6a) *Allegro*

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a viola part, labeled (6a) Allegro. The score consists of seven staves of music in G major (one sharp). The first six staves are melodic lines with various ornaments, slurs, and dynamic markings like 'ff'. The seventh staff is a bass line starting with 'stacc.' and contains fingering numbers (3, 0, 4) and a circled '5'.

Score 3 – R. Wagner, excerpt from *Tannhäuser* [Paris Version] (act 1) bar 1-20 (recordings Friday week 47 Wagner 6 to 11).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Scan of the excerpts for the mock audition (Mock Opera Excerpts n.6 – viola) published in Canvas Student (November 2019).

### Chapter 3 - How personal outcomes match with academic research and what is new

For this section of the project the original idea was to read the material about playing practise collected in the website of the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki before starting my own work. During the evaluation of my practise patterns, instead, I found a number of things that worked for me, and so I postponed checking this resource to the end of my analytical process. My personal way of organising and working with the practise patterns is here compared with the methods proposed by researchers, thus finding similarities and inspiration for future development.

The section of the website of the Sibelius Academy is structured in tables and lists to make it easy for the reader to find information or to go directly to the section of interest. Every section develops a different aspect of planning one's playing practise with clear and complete information and details.

The first aspect developed is about **supercompensation**, that is to say, the strengthening process which occurs if we take a lighter practise session after a stronger one. "It takes your muscles about 10-40 hours to recover from a demanding practice session. During this following day, which should include a light practice session, your body will further strengthen the stressed muscles. This strengthening is called supercompensation. (...) Correctly timed loading and recovery will ensure that your practice has an improving effect."<sup>4</sup> This is a process on a daily basis, which then will be developed with a weekly and monthly perspective.

Supercompensation is what I am using when the consolidation and reactivation periods are long enough in relationship to the loading and performance ones (see Figure 6 later on in this chapter). It is therefore clear why I perceived the two (first and third) examples in chapter 1 as "bad" planning. What has been experienced as a general lack of consolidation periods is technically explained in the research carried

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www2.siba.fi/harjoittelu/index.php?id=129&la=en>

out by the Sibelius Academy researchers. The mistakes I made during the years I have been working to understand more about planning, consisting mainly in not balancing different periods, have given me the possibility to experience what supercompensation is, not merely to read about it. It will be interesting to combine the personal experience and the scientific notions (number of hours muscles need to recover from effort) to plan towards auditions in the future months.

Planning is approached in the website both on a daily/weekly and on a longer term basis. Weeks look different in terms of “loading index”, depending on whether they are part of a standard practise period or part of practise periods in preparation of a competition or an examination. A “loading index” is a scale of numbers, that shows how heavy or light a period/week is.

Practice loading can be measured on a scale (loading index) of 0–5 (the numbers don’t denote hours):

0 = rest day, 1 = very light, 2 = light, 3 = medium heavy, 4 = heavy, 5 = very heavy

You should estimate your total daily loading and log it in your practice diary. Calculate your weekly loading total by adding together your daily loading index scores. Your weekly rhythm should include light, medium heavy, and heavy weeks.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from the names given to the days of practise, the main difference with my method consists in having here the possibility to calculate the total weekly work load, thus arriving at a clearer distinction of how different weeks look like.

I understand that in the elaboration of my practise patterns I have always seen the performances as examination preparations, thus having almost no cycles of standard weeks. From now on I will make my plan dependent on whether I am having a standard preparation period or I am preparing for an examination, allowing my body and my brain to learn and recover during the standard preparation and to be more goal-focused during the examination preparation.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www2.siba.fi/harjoittelu/index.php?id=132&la=en>

Long-term preparation involves a balanced amount of loading index throughout the different weeks.

We recommend a four-week rhythm during a standard practice period: week 1 light, week 2 medium heavy, week 3 heavy, week 4 a lighter (recovery week).<sup>6</sup>

This is an example of how it is possible to balance different loadings during the four weeks of a standard practise period. The rotation of loading index enables reactivation and gives time to accumulate new energy. The quote above embodies the core of the alternation of effort and rest.

You may schedule up to four heavy practice days (loading index 4) for volume weeks (a heavy week), while 2–3 medium heavy days plus, if necessary, even 1–2 rest days will suffice for light weeks.

Every fourth practice week should be a recovery week! Week 4 should be lighter than week 1 in terms of loading. The tiny blood vessel (capillary) networks that transport energy to your muscles need time to renew themselves every fourth week. If you want to improve your overall muscle condition, you have to give your body time to renew and repair its capillaries, otherwise loading will eventually lead to overtraining.<sup>7</sup>

The loading index shown above concerns standard periods of practise, while it differs when examination or performance preparation periods are taken into account. Here above are some other examples of possible combination of work loads for different weeks. The importance given to the fourth week (recovery) in the cycle is of fundamental importance for musicians, as it is for athletes. The fact of using our bodies to work, but differently from people training for sports makes us underestimate the importance of lighter periods.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www2.siba.fi/harjoittelu/index.php?id=132&la=en>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www2.siba.fi/harjoittelu/index.php?id=132&la=en>

The week before an important competition/examination/concert should be the lowest in terms of total loading. The last heavy practice session should generally be about 4–5 days before. After this, you should do recovery practice with suitable exercises to replenish energy reserves and sharpen your skills, the nature of which will depend on you and your instrument.<sup>8</sup>

I find this reference of extreme importance in balancing the preparation for performances. Especially for auditions (where the first round consists of just a few minutes of playing) it is essential to have gathered all the energy and concentration in the days before, to have the chance to play at one's best from the very beginning of the round.

Rest days are not shown in the example weeks, as different people need different amounts of rest depending on their instrument and individual make-up. You may need a few rest days per month, but once a week may be too frequent if you want to improve your basic form. You must consider your own need for rest days by listening to your body and adapting your requirements to your study programme.<sup>9</sup>

When it comes about rest days, I have now experienced that both “active” or “quality” (see Chapter 1) days off and complete days of rest (at home or taking the chance to sleep more hours) are fundamental. When it comes to “listening to your body” (see Chapter 2) I personally try to briefly detect what is the real cause of feeling tired, and eventually I acknowledge it by taking some rest.

I have experienced different situations, having to cope with everyday musical life organisation. From this experiences I found something that seems to be mirrored in the advise from the Sibelius Academy website and that works for me. For example, I can almost foresee a given state of mind arising at the end of a given period or during the

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www2.siba.fi/harjoittelu/index.php?id=134&la=en>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www2.siba.fi/harjoittelu/index.php?id=132&la=en>

transition from period to period. Nevertheless I feel I only have to learn from what quoted above.

I will now focus on some aspects of my project that concern my personal experience in planning my practise activities as a student.

### **Dealing with everyday music student life. Two outcomes**

During the the whole process of investigation for this work two factors influenced the development of my planning patterns the most: The amount of activities in the academy, which lead to a flexible way of scheduling days and weeks, and the development of an interest in the relationship between my playing practise and my physical activity.

The first aspect leads to the need of a constant adjustment of the planning patterns, due to sudden changes in the schedule. As a master student at the end of an education programme (which is for me the second master), I see every opportunity to meet musicians and discover new music as a priority. This requires flexibility in the planning, since unplanned opportunities show up and I feel I need to take them. This applies to workshops, seminars or masterclasses with different instrument teachers, or to general rehearsals or concerts, not only in the field of classical music. This is a constant updating way of planning and living which hopefully I will never give up (since it involves spontaneity and curiosity for the new and unknown). But I will have to adjust this manner of planning in order to better match the needs of a post-student, adult work life. This probably explains why in the elaboration of the planning patterns I have not frequently met the same pattern twice. Everything was almost new every time for me during these semesters, from the repertoire to learn to most of the music performed in the concerts I have listened to.

The second aspect is linked to the experiments I did in order to find the motivation to do physical activity, and especially to have a pattern helping me when for some reasons I had to stop some days and then needed to restart.



I noticed that it was almost impossible to run many times during orchestra weeks or that it was difficult to do it when I was travelling for concerts or auditions. But it suddenly became easier to run more frequently during the week after a performance. I began to understand that I could find a flexible pattern for my physical activities, thus allowing for lighter or non-activity periods, without lacking the motivation when I had to restart. In analysing it in detail, the pattern matched with the one of the alternation of weeks of the practise planning, but with an inverse flow.

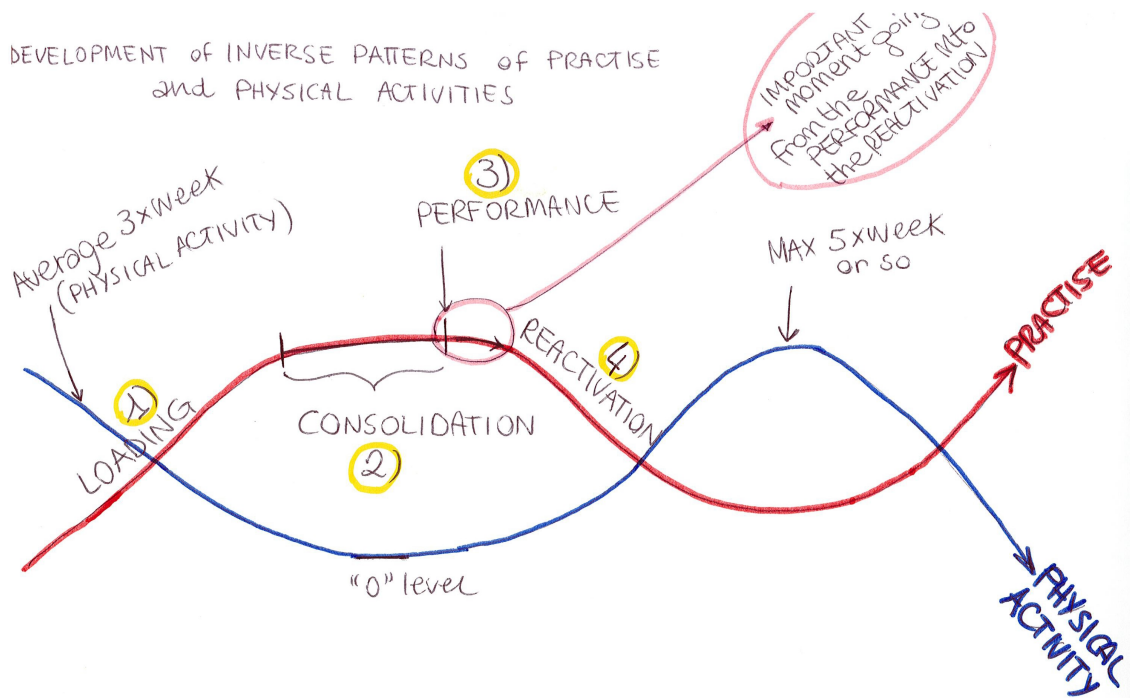


Figure 6 – The diagram shows the different phases of preparation and recover both on the practise level and on the physical activity level. It is an inverse pattern, where the loading of practise corresponds to a reactivation period for the physical activities. Differently from the practise, in the physical activities the peak is not a performance, but just a period of more intense training. In the diagram I underline the importance of the hours after the performances, that is to say the transition period from the performance (stress situation) to the reactivation (non stress situation). The process of analysis of this specific period is still going on; up to know I have been observing that I usually need some time alone, in silence to gather myself back after a performance. This applies mostly to auditions, but sometimes to concerts as well. I am currently



trying to get that space of time for me when I change clothes after the performances. I focus on the movements I do and I slow them down, since a general sense of hurry normally grabs me after performances, probably due to the amount of adrenaline still in my body.

## Chapter 4 - The parallel journey of self-awareness and concentration

Different ways of approaching the subject of organisation of practise, motivation and attitude were the main point of several meetings we had through the semesters with some of our teachers and orchestra musicians. All these seminars and workshops were dealing with different aspects of the life of a musician, but, in my opinion, everything was aimed to awaken our awareness of ourselves as musicians and as human beings. I am mostly referring to the introductory meetings at the beginning of each semester, as well as to other seminars offered during the academic year.

My process of developing focus on self-awareness and concentration did not begin as a planned activity. It started during the development of this work, basically after meeting Jackie Readon in December 2018, in a workshop at the academy.

My curiosity about the subject and the actual possibility to follow a structured course made me begin this journey quite soon, already at the beginning of January. From the first days, where I only had to watch some videos and make exercises and experiments, to the following weeks, where I began to meditate in a “mentored” way, it felt like I was on a path towards awareness. Daily videos accompanied this journey, helping me to understand my reactions and feelings in daily life and in practise-linked situations. That is why I am using the term “mentored”, since I really had the impression to be personally guided and supported, even if Jackie was there only during the videos.

The 12-weeks meditation course ended at the beginning of October 2019 for me, since from the middle of April to the beginning of August the website was offline due to technical problems.

These technical problems actually gave me the possibility to get stronger and perceive and experience my **determination** in continuing my daily meditation practise alone, with my timer, not giving up one single day.

By reading *The inner game of tennis* by Timothy Gallwey<sup>10</sup> in the weeks just after having finished my meditation course, I am, at the moment of writing, having the possibility to review the process I went through with my practise and get stronger self-awareness. It is for me as if I was reading the same book again after some time, or in a different language. While attending the course I was feeling changes in my attitude towards life and practise from an inner perspective; while reading the book, I am looking at the experience of the past months in another way, reflecting on the examples of the book and connecting them to what has happened and is happening to me in terms of development of awareness and self-knowledge. From these experiences I can now constantly develop the planning of my practising in more efficient and balanced ways. In the following paragraph I give space for quotations from and reflections on the most empowering teachings I have met so far during this journey.

In the first chapters of *The inner game of tennis* the main focus is on understanding that inside us there are two selves: "Self 1 (teller) and Self 2 (doer)"<sup>11</sup>. Our aim is to make them cooperate. "Getting it together mentally in tennis involves the learning of several internal skills"<sup>12</sup>. Among these there are two which play a relevant role in my path as well. The first is about building a strong relationship of **confidence and self-confidence** between the two selves, that is to say "learning to 'trust thyself' (Self 2) to do what you (Self 1) ask of it"<sup>13</sup>; The second concerns "**learning to see 'nonjudgmentally'** - that is, to see what is happening rather than merely noticing how well or how badly it is happening."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Timothy W. Gallwey. *The Inner Game of Tennis*. London: Pan Books in association with Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1986.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

The preparatory weeks to the meditation course start from this same perspective. Examples and exercises given during the first days are aimed to both build self-confidence and experience with what it means to face life with a non-judgemental view.

Nevertheless “all these skills are subsidiary to the master skill (...) the art of **concentration**.”<sup>15</sup> This is the core of the **meditation** course. I discovered that meditation is not simply relaxing the mind, but to really have the possibility to focus on what one wants or needs to do. This is of extreme importance for the process of preparation and learning how to practise and play for performances. Week after week the course proposes different targets to one’s attention and focus. The key word through the whole process is **acceptance**. Acceptance is understanding that we are human beings and therefore we can fail or make mistakes, even if we are doing our best.

It is a challenge to practise acceptance in everyday life and when practising music, since we are used to judge, especially ourselves. According to Gallwey, this is the process: “First the mind judges the event, then groups events, then identifies with the combined event, and finally judges itself.”<sup>16</sup>

“(...) Letting go of judgements does not mean ignoring errors.”<sup>17</sup> Mistakes need to be fixed and we can always learn from them. The difference is in simply catching them. “When the mind is free of any thought or judgement, it is still and acts like a perfect mirror. Then and only then can we know things as they are.”<sup>18</sup> Only then we can look at ourselves objectively and find a solution to the mistakes or make experiments to fix them, without giving the mind the power to go through the self-judging moment. “This process (of self-judging) can be slowed by using descriptive but non judgemental words to describe the events you see.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 28.

A practical example of this process in relationship to the organisation of the musical practising can be the following: On a day of low energy and little motivation to practise I can go back to the previous days and weeks and analyse the amount of practise and the patterns of my organisation and find a reason why at the moment I cannot find the energy and motivation to practise; or just start to practise without thinking and see what happens in 10-15 minutes; or have a quick look at the future and sketch the following days or weeks, organise the repertoire I need to prepare and thus understand that it is possible to have a lighter day to refresh the energy for the next period. Whatever the case is, the element common to all these solutions is that they lack self-judgement and resulting frustration. They are just tools helping to face challenges in an objective way.

I needed time and daily commitment in order to process this new way of thinking. During the months and already day after day it was possible to make small changes, especially in how I reacted to the same things differently from the past. I was interested in understanding the mechanisms of the mind and the causes of actions. I tried to react differently in coping with situations which had already occurred in the past and for which I had not found a satisfying reaction. For example, I started to meditate before practising when I felt that my mind was confused. "(...) when we 'unlearn' judgement we discover, (...), that we don't need the motivation of a reformer to change our 'BAD' habits."<sup>20</sup> As "it is much more difficult to break a habit when there is no adequate replacement for it."<sup>21</sup> What Gallwey explains for the tennis player, I experienced through exercises and activities based on daily life during the course. The tip given in the book is extremely simple and revolutionary at the same time: "(...) there is no need to fight old habits. Start new ones."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 69.

This is the recommendation I would always like to have in mind, now when I am finishing this project as well as for my future: The method can then be the expression of a constant development.

## **Conclusions**

This work aims to awaken awareness. Some of us need to experiment and some are looking for sources in order to discover what we are interested in. My process of collecting, analysing and writing about ways of planning practising activities gave me an opportunity to understand that there are only a few things that matter for me, when it comes to organisation. A balanced alternation between practising, doing physical activity and spending my time off with people from whom I can get inspiration is vital for me at the stage I am in now, in life and in music. This aspect is directly linked to the need of a good and regular amount of sleeping hours and a healthy nutrition. In my personal experience all this can help if I take care of my parallel growth as human being, through meditation. Since all these aspects are needed, but it is quite hard if not impossible to fully succeed in dealing with all of them at the same time, I have figured out for myself what I will try to have as a grounding value throughout my experience as musician: Keep making experiments to understand things, especially when they are unclear and difficult to sort out and communicate and share as much as possible with my colleagues and friends; and in doing this never give up enthusiasm, which is fundamental for me in music.

## **Bibliography**

### **Scores**

#### *List of excerpts for audition in Brussels:*

Brahms, Johannes. *Variations on a theme by J. Haydn (Var. V and VIII)*

Mendelssohn, Felix. *A Midsummer Night's Dream (scherzo)*

Schostakovich, Dimitri. *Symphony n. 5 (1<sup>st</sup> movement)*

Strauss, Richard. *Don Juan (opening till D)*

#### *List of excerpts for the mock audition in week 48 2019:*

Berg, Alban. *Wozzeck (end act 1)*

Mendelssohn, Felix. *A Midsummer Night's Dream (scherzo)*

Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus. *Figaros Hochzeit (ouverture)*

Smetana, Bedřich. *Die verkaufte Braut (ouverture)*

Strauss, Richard. *Der Rosenkavalier (act 3 - Waltz)*

Wagner, Richard. *Tannhäuser [Paris Version] (2 excerpts, from act 1 and act 2)*

### **Recordings**

Monday week 46 Mendelssohn 1, 2, 3.

Tuesday week 46 run through excerpts Brussels, 6 recordings.

Saturday week 46 Berg 1 to 8.

Friday week 47 Wagner 6 to 11.

### **Websites**

<http://www2.siba.fi/harjoittelu/index.php?id=2&la=en> Sibelius Academy section about "practise" - last access date 11/12/2019

<https://friendlyeyes.com/> Self-awareness and meditation course - last access date 14/12/2019

### **Literature**

Gallwey, W. Timothy. *The Inner Game of Tennis*. London: Pan Books in association with Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1986.