

Body, Mind, and Music—Musicians Are Putting It All Together

Mental practice is the way to go, according to a new book called *Mental Practice and Imagery for Musicians*. Many of us have heard of Olympic athletes using mental practice and imagery techniques for reaching peak performance levels. But what about musicians? Over the years, many well-known players have discussed the importance of mental involvement in learning and performing music. But now there is a large body of scientific research to back up and expand on the sometimes idiosyncratic recommendations of these musicians.

In its most basic form, mental practice involves creating mental representations of the sights, sounds, and sensations of playing an instrument. Immediately thereafter, the musician plays physically, striving to achieve the musical ideals projected during the mental rehearsal. In turn, the physical rehearsal is followed by a mental review that reinforces desirable aspects and helps the musician to identify and analyze difficulties. Realistic mental representations actually influence the nervous system and program the body to perform in accordance with the projected manner of playing. To supplement realistic mental rehearsals, creative imagery can be used to evoke specific musical qualities or to influence technical aspects of playing; it can also help in establishing a productive state-of-mind. These basic principles of mental practice can be expanded on and applied in a variety of ways for enhanced learning and performance.

The importance of using mental skills to prevent music-related injuries should not be overlooked. An astonishing number of today's musicians are suffering pain and sometimes debilitating injuries: in a study of professional orchestra musicians, the incidence of injury was in excess of 50%! Possible causes of injuries include improper playing technique, excessively long rehearsal hours, and the omission of regularly scheduled breaks from physical playing. Mental practice heightens the musician's awareness of sensory feedback and allows the player to rest physically while still accomplishing vital work. In fact, research shows that more is actually accomplished by taking frequent short breaks and working mentally than by fitting in a maximum amount of playing time. The musician can also use mental practice to help release muscular tension and to monitor fatigue, in the interest of preventing injury.

In *Mental Practice & Imagery for Musicians*, author and professional violinist Malva Freymuth lays out a logical, step-by-step approach for training and using mental skills. The vital characteristics of mental practice and imagery are discussed, and many examples are given that show how mental work can be combined with physical practice for optimum results. Also included are pointers for teaching mental skills to young students, and sections on relaxation and on the use of mental skills in dealing with music-related injuries. The techniques described in this book can be used by musicians of every skill level—professionals and amateurs, teachers and students.