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MOTIVATION AND COVID-19

BY JOHN HACKETT

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MOTIVATION AND COVID-19

BY JOHN HACKETT

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Lockdown. Social distancing. COVID-19. The all-too-familiar words that are defining our existence at the time of writing (May 2020). These are strange and disturbing times we are living through. Perhaps, by the time this is published, these phrases will be losing their pertinence, and we will all be coming out into the sunlit uplands, joining with our musician friends to play together in packed concert halls. Somehow, though, I doubt it.

I live in London (UK) and am in the fortunate position of working from home, so the disruption to my professional life has been relatively minor. But my social life does now and always has revolved around music. I play in several amateur orchestras (“community bands/orchestras” for my American friends), giving some fifteen to twenty concerts a year playing anything from Bach suites to Mahler symphonies. So, I never want for motivation to keep up my standard of playing.

Now, though, there is nothing on the horizon—all planned concerts cancelled and nothing in my diary.

Motivation

COVID-19 was certainly the reason I wanted to write this article about personal and group motivation, but life events in general can also conspire to thwart our best intentions. The current situation is just an extreme example.

Staying motivated to practice for the non-pro player is often an issue. For some, only the knowledge that a concert is coming up will provide the necessary motivation to practice. Whatever your standard of playing, be it beginner or seasoned ex-pro, the value of communal playing cannot be overstated. The reason amateurs play with no financial reward is not to amuse the cat or annoy the wife; it is to give pleasure to others and ourselves by the very act of performing to the best of our abilities. Without regular rehearsals and the prospect of a performance, all our motivation must be intrinsic: playing purely for the pleasure of playing.

According to Kendra Cherry, “Intrinsic motivation refers to behavior that is driven by internal rewards. In other words, the motivation to engage in a behavior arises from within the individual because it is naturally satisfying to you. This contrasts with extrinsic motivation, which involves engaging in a behavior in order to earn external rewards or avoid punishment.”¹ Most musicians (both pro and amateur) must, I would argue, have a very high level of intrinsic motivation; few go into music for the money! It can, if you are lucky, be very financially rewarding, but for the majority, it is not. Sure, we have external rewards in

the form of parental support, teacher praise, or audience applause; but pushing through the grind of learning to play well must come from inside—the joy of getting better. In the current times of lockdown and social distancing, we must all rely on our reserves of intrinsic motivation to at least maintain our standards, but, hopefully, to improve. And what better time to focus on improving each aspect of our playing than when we do not have the distraction and worry of performing for others. Even in normal times, having the determination to put aside time to practice during a busy schedule of work and family commitments can be a real challenge. It is all too easy to lose the habit of regular, mindful practice when there are other, more pressing demands. It is much easier to maintain motivation if you are going forward. If you are always struggling to maintain a standard, rather than improve it, motivation can easily slip away. A player’s individual strengths and weaknesses will affect what to concentrate on, but there are, I think, three key areas that need to be developed and maintained. This is true at any time, but most critically when we do not have the incentive of new, possibly difficult, music to master. First, tone—long tones, flow studies. The Cichowicz *Long Tone* and *Flow Studies* books are very good. You can also play the Clarke *Technical Studies* slowly to concentrate on the quality and evenness of your sound. Second, facility. Clarke studies (everyone has a copy, right?). I tend to use the Vizzutti method books more (especially book 1, *Technical Studies*, starting on page 32) and use a trick from the Stamp books of pausing on the high and low notes. Finger technique is essential for good articulation and accurate slurring. Third, strength. Stamina will diminish if you don’t work on it. The exercises above can be adapted to focus on stamina by playing them slowly and quietly. Concentrate on minimizing any pressure and rest frequently. For example, play one flow study and then rest in order to recover before continuing. Or, one scale. One exercise I find very good for this is one-octave scales in all forms in one breath—major, harmonic minor, melodic minor, natural minor, and whole-tone. It takes a bit of learning (I do it from memory) to work out each key, but it is worth the effort. I start from F-sharp and then go up and down in semitones using the low one to open up before doing the next higher one. Finally, why not take a book of studies you have (Charlier, Brandt, etc.), work on each one in order, and record it? Recording adds an element of performance and adrenaline, which, without concerts to work toward, is missing in everyday

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practice. For my part, I am trying to work through all the Charlier studies. If it goes well, you can share on Facebook or YouTube and maybe even start a channel!

One final thought here—try to make practicing a habit. In these strange times, the days can become a blur. Give yourself some structure and order. Set some goals and “me time.” The benefits of regularity and habit are relevant at any time, but all the more so when all the normalities of life are in such disarray.

Playing together

While *physically* playing together still seems to be something for the distant future (remember, this is May 2020!), the idea of a “practice buddy” can still work. All you need is an internet connection and a smart phone. It would be good to have a nice computer and a good microphone, but anything will do.

Playing together, even with a fast internet connection and good kit, is still fraught with difficulties, but practicing together is perfectly possible. Get Zoom (free), set up a meeting with a friend, and listen to each other. You play a study, your friend critiques it, they then play it, and you critique them. Turn and turnabout—just as you might do in the “real” world, but using Zoom instead. In fact, it may be even easier than the real world, as you don’t have to travel. If you live in a rural area, Zoom or other video conferencing software can be a real boon for staying in touch and working with other players—even having lessons.

A tip: the audio settings are critical! In Zoom (similar settings probably exist in other platforms as well), go to the Audio Settings and make sure that “Automatically adjust microphone volume” is *unchecked*. Then click on the Advanced settings button and check the “Show in-meeting option to ‘Enable Original Sound from microphone.’” Make sure all ends of the conference use these settings. These changes make sure the sound is passed unmodified, which is important for dynamic contrast. (See https://bit.ly/zoom_settings).

Lots of people of all standards and ages are doing multitrack videos now and posting them online. There are some wonderful ones out there; search YouTube for “Matthias Höfs: Trumpet Excerpts” or “Bugler’s Holiday Royal Academy” for just two examples.

It is possible to do this yourself. While it is much simpler to do audio only, using, for example, the free Audacity software (<https://www.audacityteam.org>), a video mix can be created relatively easily with the Acapella app (<https://tinyurl.com/itg2010m>).

You can multitrack with yourself or with friends. Perhaps you play with a jazz group or orchestra. Maybe one of the other players would like to try to play a duet with you! It’s a great way to stay motivated.

Start simply. Choose a few easy duets until you get the hang of the technology and the processes involved and then progress onto harder ones. Erik Veldkamp, for example, has some nice jazzy ones on QPress. It is fun trying to get it all to work, and it helps you retain your listening and rhythm skills; you must stay in time, or it will sound awful. Usually, these videos are done using a click track with which you play. Then, whoever is

editing pulls all the bits together. There are plenty of YouTube tutorials on how to do it, and there will certainly be some for whatever software you are using.²

A word about the click track—without getting too detailed, the best way to do this is in stages. First, create a click track in Audacity. Then record one part—it is best to use either the melody or bass line—while listening to the click track. Join the two together. Now, each person can add their part while listening to the combined track; this will make sure that both rhythm and tuning can be controlled as each part is added. If you use only a pure click, track tuning will be a problem!

Personally, I use a mixture of Audacity, iMovie, and Filmora9 (<https://tinyurl.com/itg2010n>). I also use a good microphone (Zoom H4N: <https://www.zoom-na.com>) so I can record the

sound separately from the video and use Audacity to add some reverb to make my office sound more like a church.

Do not expect too much of yourself! There are a whole bunch of parameters you will not be able to control at home, which will

affect the recording. This is for fun; enjoy it. The odd mistake and the tone quality of the recording are secondary; the primary aim is to motivate yourself and others, to keep playing, and to keep improving. Hopefully, you will start to do these things in the dark times of COVID-19 and continue with them once life gets back to something resembling normal.

If you do not live near a good music shop, then I will put in a plug for QPress (<https://qpress.ca>). They are a great source of brass music, with a wide collection of studies, duets, trios, methods, etc. that are all available as PDFs.

Here is another tip: if you are recording the audio and video separately, always clap three times before you start. This will give you an anchor to help align the video and audio tracks.

Large groups

All of this is fine for very small groups and for keeping yourself in shape. Larger groups present the same problems of motivation and “staying in touch,” but are an order of magnitude more difficult. There are multitrack videos of large groups (search YouTube for “socially distant orchestra” for some examples), but they require really good software and lots of time

and skill to edit together. However, they still use the same technique: each player independently recording their part.

But what to do if you don’t have the time or expertise to do anything like that? First, try to stay together socially. I have regular Zoom meetings (virtual after-rehearsal pub meetings)

with the brass sections of two of the orchestras for which I play. This keeps us in touch with each other socially and helps us feel that we are still a proper brass section. Others I know do online quizzes or play online bridge—anything to keep the social bonds alive so people still feel involved with the orchestra even if it is not rehearsing and don’t know when they next will.

With a smaller part of an orchestra—as this is ITG, then obviously I am talking about the brass section here, but it can

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apply just as well to the woodwinds and strings—it is possible to arrange some multi-tracking. Maybe a ten-part arrangement of a Bach chorale or Richard Strauss's *Wiener Philharmoniker Fanfare* if you are feeling particularly adventurous. A project like this can provide motivation for your own section to practice and, if you share it, for the whole orchestra.

If it is good enough, it can also be used at any time to enhance the profile of the band or orchestra on social media and as a way to stay in touch with your audience.

The responsibility for setting up something like this really lies with the section leader (principal trumpet, for example), but anyone can take the initiative, especially if they have the equipment and skills required or are willing to acquire them.

The future (or the “new normal”)

While I am mainly an amateur orchestral trumpet player, the same problems apply to all musicians—professional and non-professional—in these socially distant times and in whatever genres and groups they play. From jazz trios to full-size symphony orchestras, the future is uncertain.

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We all need to stay motivated so that our skills do not deteriorate. We need to stay positive and not get too disheartened. We need to keep being creative for our own mental health. We need to support our friends and colleagues who may be having a harder time. I have a house with a garden and live by a park. For this I am very grateful; it is so much harder for those without such what seem now to be luxuries. We need to look forward to being physically together again with those we love, playing together the music we love to a packed concert hall. I don't know when that will be, but October seems unlikely. My bet is that my next concert will be March 2021. Almost certainly, the performing arts will be the last to open, to see large groups of people gathered together in close proximity. So, we must be prepared to be in this for the long haul.

In the meantime, stay safe and stay positive.

About the author: John Hackett lives in London with his violinist wife. He studied trumpet at the Royal Academy of Music in the late '70s and worked as a freelance artist and teacher for some years before changing direction. He now works as an IT consultant and plays as much as he can. John is currently principal trumpet with the Salomon Orchestra and Covent Garden Chamber Orchestra and sub-principal with the Kensington Symphony Orchestra and Chelsea Opera Group. On John's personal website (<http://www.johnhackett.me>), you can find, among other things, recordings of some duets and Charlier studies.

Endnotes

- 1 Kendra Cherry, “Intrinsic Motivation: How Your Behavior is Driven by Internal Rewards,” Verywell Mind, accessed June 29, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/itg2010o>.

- 2 Acapella tutorial (https://bit.ly/acapella_tutorial); Audacity tutorial (https://bit.ly/audacity_01); Audacity click track tutorial (https://bit.ly/audacity_02); Filmora9 tutorial (https://bit.ly/filmora9_intro).

