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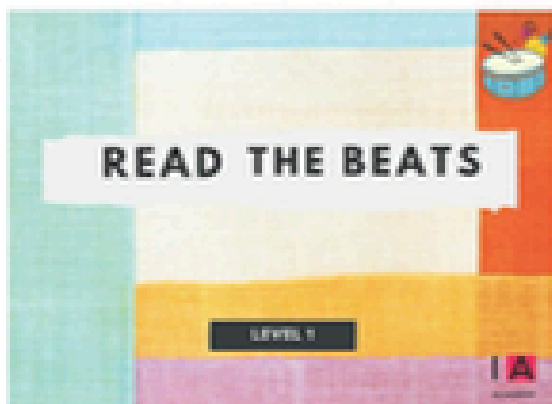
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ISSUE

THINKING LIKE A MUSICIAN

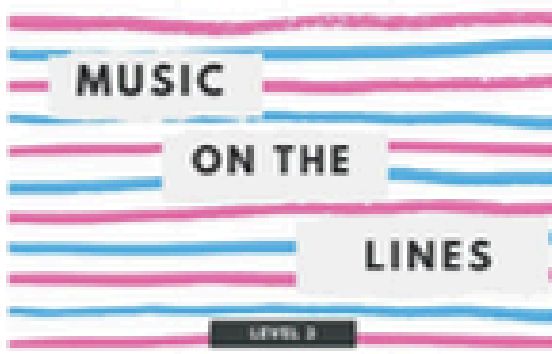
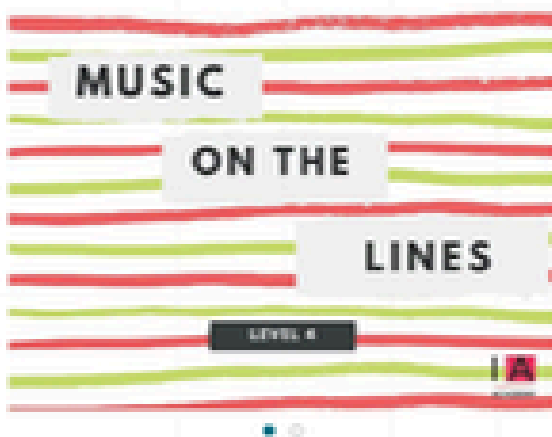






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FROM THE EDITOR

Thinking Like a Musician

One of the enduring questions surrounding music education is why musicians spend so much time learning things that appear to have little direct relevance to music itself.

Students learn to identify intervals, recognize patterns, memorize structures, compare interpretations, and navigate increasingly complex systems of relationships that often remain invisible to non-musicians. To an outside observer, much of this activity can seem strangely indirect. If the goal is to perform music, why devote so much time to analysis? If the goal is to teach, why study cognition? If the goal is composition, why investigate history?

The answer, perhaps, is that music education has never been solely about music.

What musicians develop over years of study is not merely a collection of skills, pieces, or professional competencies. They develop habits of mind.

Consider what happens when a musician learns a new work. The process requires attention to detail while simultaneously maintaining awareness of larger structures. Individual notes acquire meaning through relationships. Small decisions influence larger outcomes. Patterns emerge, disappear, and return in transformed forms. The musician learns to move continuously between local and global perspectives, between immediate problems and long-term goals.

These cognitive habits are not unique to music, but music provides an unusually concentrated environment in which to cultivate them. Musicians become accustomed to complexity. They learn to tolerate ambiguity while searching for coherence. They develop sensitivity to patterns that others may overlook. They spend years refining the ability to listen—not merely to sounds, but to relationships, contexts, and possibilities. They learn that understanding often emerges gradually, through sustained engagement rather than immediate answers.

Perhaps this is why musicians frequently find themselves applying musical thinking far beyond music itself.

The entrepreneur recognizes patterns in markets much as a performer recognizes patterns in a score. The teacher learns to balance structure and flexibility much as an improviser balances preparation and spontaneity. The researcher searches for connections among ideas in much the same way a composer searches for relationships among musical materials.

The transfer is rarely deliberate. Indeed, one of the most fascinating aspects of musical thinking is that it often operates beneath conscious awareness. Musicians may not explicitly describe themselves as systems thinkers, pattern recognizers, or problem solvers. Yet years of engagement with music quietly cultivate precisely these capacities.

This issue of MusicalQ explores that proposition.

Not that musicians possess a superior form of intelligence, nor that musical training guarantees success outside the arts. Such claims are both exaggerated and unhelpful. Rather, we begin with a simpler observation: the study of music shapes the ways people perceive, organize, interpret, and respond to the world around them. The articles that follow examine this process from multiple perspectives. Some explore creativity and cognition. Others investigate teaching, performance, analysis, leadership, and professional development.

Long after specific pieces have been forgotten, after competitions have ended, and after technical skills have faded, the habits of mind developed through musical study often remain.

In the end, the most important thing music teaches may not be musical at all. It may be a way of understanding complexity, finding patterns, and creating meaning in a world that rarely arrives neatly organized.



Antonella Di Giulio

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF AND FOUNDER

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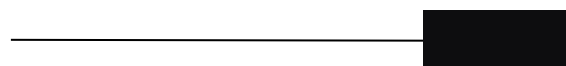
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THE MUSICIAN'S MIND

WHY MUSIC MAY BE ABOUT MORE THAN SOUND



Ask a group of musicians why music matters and the answers tend to be remarkably consistent. Music communicates emotion. Music creates beauty. Music builds community, provides artistic expression, enriches culture, and offers solace, meaning, and connection. All of these answers are true — yet they share an interesting characteristic: they describe what music does rather than what music requires. We speak about music almost exclusively in terms of its outcomes, its emotional impact, its cultural significance, its educational value, its aesthetic qualities. Far less frequently do we stop to consider the extraordinary cognitive demands that make those outcomes possible in the first place.

This omission is understandable. The better musicians become, the less visible many of their mental processes appear, even to themselves. What once required conscious effort gradually becomes automatic; patterns are recognized almost instantly; decisions occur without deliberate calculation; complex relationships are perceived as naturally as words in a familiar language. The resulting fluency can obscure the remarkable fact that music asks human beings to engage in forms of thinking that are both highly sophisticated and unusually diverse.

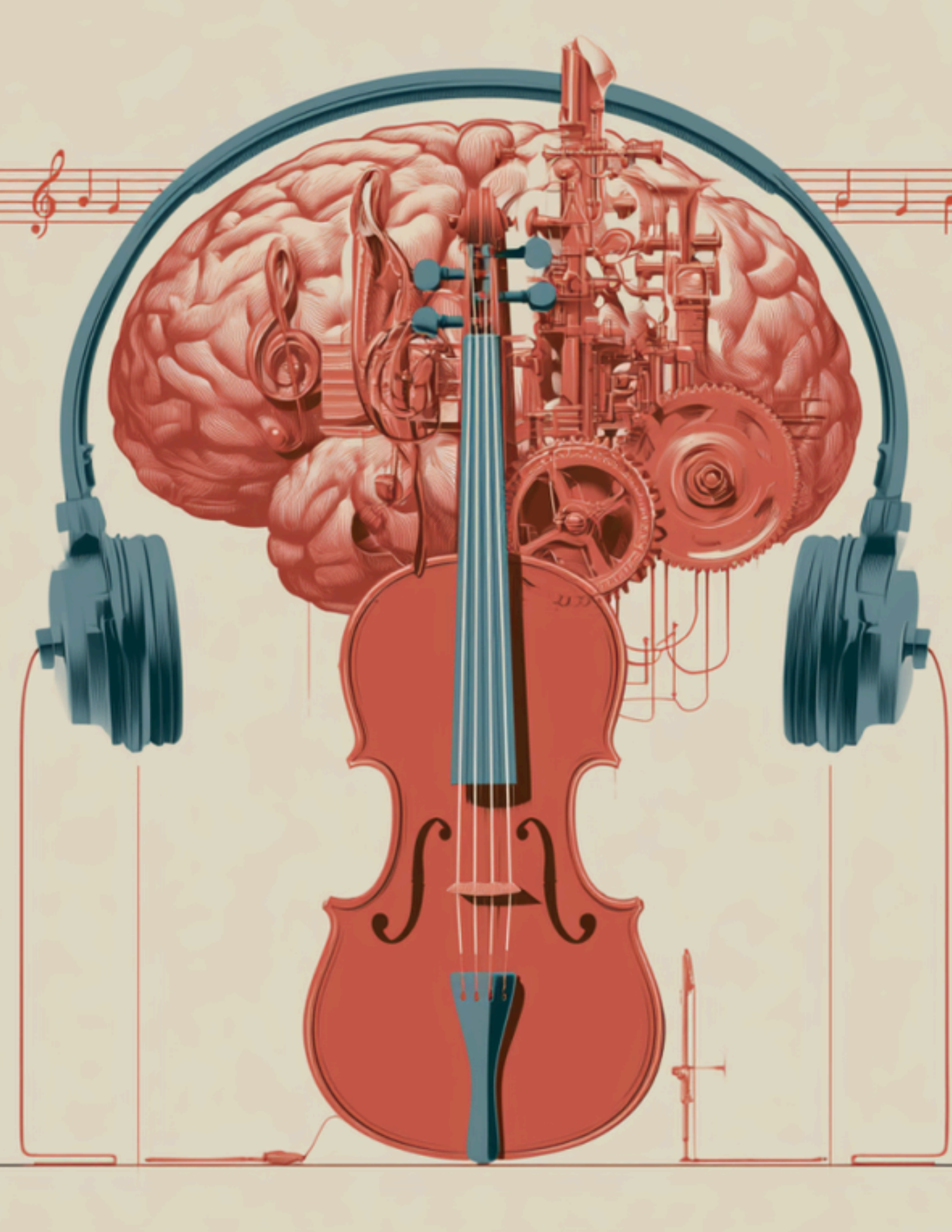
A musician reading a score is not merely decoding symbols. She is simultaneously processing rhythm, pitch, harmony, structure, timbre, articulation, dynamics, style, and expressive intent — anticipating future events while responding to present ones, evaluating local details while maintaining awareness of large-scale form, making predictions, identifying patterns, solving problems, and adjusting decisions in real time. In other words, she is thinking, and thinking in ways that are considerably more complex than the apparent effortlessness of accomplished musicianship tends to suggest.

This observation may seem obvious, yet its implications are surprisingly far-reaching. For much of the modern era, discussions about music education have focused primarily on skills — technique, repertoire, performance, achievement — and have measured progress through examinations, competitions, juries, and public presentations.

These indicators matter, but they sometimes distract from a deeper and more consequential question: what kinds of thinking does music cultivate?

The question is not new. Philosophers, educators, psychologists, and neuroscientists have wrestled with it for generations. Plato believed that musical training shaped character at a foundational level. Medieval scholars placed music among the mathematical sciences. Enlightenment thinkers viewed musical study as a means of refining perception and judgment. Contemporary researchers investigate the relationship between musical engagement and attention, memory, creativity, executive functioning, and the broader architecture of learning. Their conclusions differ considerably, but they share a common intuition — that music is not merely something we learn, but a way of learning. Seen from this perspective, musical training begins to look less like the acquisition of a specialized artistic skill and more like participation in a remarkably sophisticated system of cognitive development. more fragmented.

The learning process in music bears a striking resemblance to how human beings learn in virtually every domain. Musicians simply happen to spend thousands of hours practicing pattern recognition in one of its most concentrated and demanding forms.

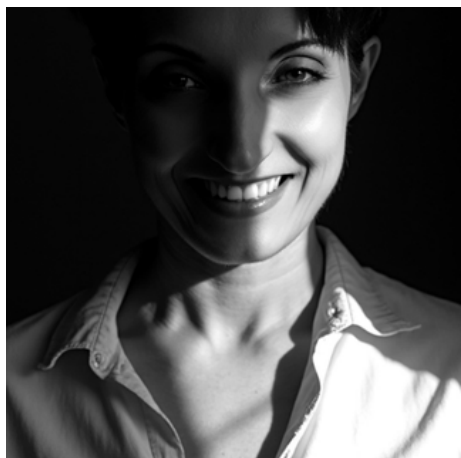




This does not mean that musical thinking is superior to other forms of thinking, nor that musicians possess a unique kind of intelligence unavailable to non-musicians. What it suggests is something both more modest and more interesting: that music provides an unusually rich laboratory for the development of habits of mind that extend considerably beyond music itself.

The ability to recognize relationships, tolerate ambiguity, anticipate consequences, balance structure and creativity, revise assumptions, and maintain attention across multiple simultaneous levels of complexity is not useful only in rehearsal rooms and concert halls. These capacities shape how individuals approach problems, organize knowledge, communicate ideas, and navigate uncertainty across every domain of professional and personal life. Yet they often remain invisible precisely because they are embedded within musical activity itself — we notice the performance, and overlook the thinking that made it possible.

Perhaps it is time to reverse that perspective. Rather than asking only what music produces, we might also ask what music teaches the mind to do, and take that question seriously as an argument for musical education in its own right. The answer may help explain why musical training continues to matter even in a world where information has become increasingly abundant, technologies increasingly powerful, and professional pathways increasingly difficult to predict. Music, after all, is not merely an art form. It is also — and perhaps most durably — a way of thinking.



About the Author

Antonella Di Giulio (Ph.D.) is a pianist, scholar, and founder of MusicalIQ, a platform exploring the intersection of music, cognition, and creative practice. She is the Program Chair for the Allegheny Chapter of the American Musicological Society, organizer of international music festivals, and a leading voice in music pedagogy, technology, and interdisciplinary innovation.



THE SEVEN HABITS OF MUSICAL THINKERS

A Framework for Understanding Musical Cognition

Music is not merely an art form but a way of thinking — that the cognitive demands of musical training cultivate habits of mind that extend far beyond the rehearsal room or concert hall. If that argument is correct, an obvious question follows: what does that thinking actually look like? What are the specific intellectual dispositions that musical training develops, and why might they matter in contexts that have nothing to do with sound?

I would propose seven habits. They are not exhaustive, and they are not unique to musicians — other disciplines cultivate some of them in their own ways. What is distinctive about musical training is the particular concentration and consistency with which it develops all seven together, often simultaneously, across thousands of hours of sustained practice. Taken individually, each habit is valuable. Taken together, they constitute something that begins to resemble a comprehensive cognitive education.

1. Pattern Recognition: Seeing Relationships Where Others See Isolated Events

The musician's ear is, above all else, a pattern-seeking instrument. From the earliest stages of training, musicians learn to perceive relationships — between notes, phrases, sections, and movements — that are not immediately obvious to the untrained listener.

A melodic fragment is recognized as the inversion of an earlier theme. A harmonic progression is heard as a variant of a familiar cadential formula. A rhythmic figure is understood not as a local event but as part of a structural argument that spans the entire work.

This capacity to detect relationships within apparent complexity is not merely an aesthetic skill. It is one of the most transferable forms of intelligence that musical training produces. Pattern recognition underlies effective thinking in virtually every domain of human endeavor. The physician who identifies a subtle

constellation of symptoms. The investor who perceives a structural shift in market behavior before it becomes obvious. The teacher who recognizes the particular shape of a student's confusion and understands exactly where the misunderstanding originated. In each case, the cognitive operation is essentially the same: extracting meaningful signal from what others perceive as noise, and doing so quickly enough for the recognition to be useful. Musicians practice this operation with unusual rigor, and the habit, once formed, does not stay confined to music.

2. Listening Before Acting: Gathering Information Before Responding

One of the first and most fundamental lessons of musical ensemble playing is that your contribution depends on what you hear. Musical training, particularly in collaborative contexts, instills a counter-instinctual patience: the understanding that the quality of a response is directly proportional to the quality of the listening that precedes it.

This habit has implications that extend well beyond musical performance. In an era that rewards speed of reaction and continuous output, the disposition to gather information before responding — to listen fully before speaking, to understand before evaluating — is increasingly rare and increasingly valuable. Listening before acting is not passivity. It is the precondition of effective response.

3. Thinking in Systems: Understanding How Individual Elements Interact

Every sound exists within a web of relationships — harmonic, rhythmic, structural, expressive — that gives it meaning. The same pitch functions differently depending on what surrounds it; the same dynamic marking means something different in a Baroque suite than in a Romantic symphony; the same gesture carries distinct implications depending on where it falls within the larger formal architecture. Musical understanding, at every level of sophistication, requires the ability to hold multiple levels of organization in mind simultaneously and to perceive how local events participate in larger wholes.

The professional who can perceive these interactions — who understands how a decision in one area of an organization produces consequences in another, or how a change in one variable ripples through an interconnected network — possesses an analytical capacity that is both genuinely rare and genuinely consequential. Musical training develops this capacity not through abstract instruction but through thousands of hours of practice in which systems thinking is not optional but structurally required.

4. Comfort with Ambiguity: Living with Uncertainty Before Resolution Appears

Great music almost never resolves immediately. Tension is introduced and sustained; questions are posed and deferred; expectations are established only to be complicated, subverted, or delayed.



This tolerance for unresolved tension — the ability to remain productively engaged with a problem before its solution has revealed itself — is one of the less obvious but more important dispositions that musical training cultivates.

The professional world is saturated with ambiguity. Markets shift unpredictably; research yields contradictory findings; complex negotiations resist clean resolution; creative projects pass through sustained periods of apparent incoherence before their logic becomes clear. The instinct in such circumstances is often to reach prematurely for closure — to impose a resolution before the situation has been sufficiently understood. The musician who has spent years learning to sit with harmonic tension, to follow a developmental passage through its complications without demanding that it resolve before it is ready, has practiced a form of intellectual patience that proves extraordinarily useful when the stakes extend beyond the concert hall.

5. Structured Creativity: Innovating Within Constraints

Musical creativity has never operated in the absence of constraints. The sonata

moves through an expected sequence of tonal regions. The fugue develops its subject according to established contrapuntal principles. The jazz improviser works within a harmonic progression and a rhythmic framework. Even the most radically experimental music defines itself in relation to conventions it is deliberately transgressing. Far from inhibiting creativity, these constraints are what make it possible — they provide the shared vocabulary without which communication collapses, and the resistance against which genuine inventiveness can push.

The most creative professionals in any field are rarely those who ignore the constraints of their medium, their audience, their resources, or their time — they are those who understand those constraints deeply enough to work within them with maximum ingenuity. The designer who produces a brilliant solution under a severe budget restriction. The engineer who finds an elegant workaround within the limits of existing infrastructure. The writer who produces something genuinely original within the conventions of an established form.



6. Iterative Improvement: Viewing Mastery as a Process Rather Than an Event

The process of musical learning is inherently iterative — a passage is played, evaluated, identified as deficient in some specific respect, isolated, worked on in concentrated form, reintegrated into context, evaluated again, and refined further.

This cycle repeats not dozens but hundreds or thousands of times across the development of a single work, and the musician who cannot tolerate the experience of repeated imperfection — who expects each repetition to feel like progress and becomes discouraged when it does not — is unlikely to advance very far. Musical training teaches, at a level deep enough to become habitual, that mastery is not a destination reached at a particular moment but a process that unfolds incrementally, across time, through sustained engagement with difficulty.

7. Long-Term Thinking: Delaying Gratification in Pursuit of Larger Goals

The ability to practice a passage slowly and correctly when playing it fast and approximately would be more immediately satisfying requires a specific relationship to time — one in which the distant goal of genuine fluency is held clearly enough in mind to override the immediate appeal of the easier alternative.

This capacity for disciplined deferred gratification is perhaps the most foundational habit that musical training develops. A musician who cannot sacrifice the pleasure of the run-through for the discipline of the slow practice will not improve.

More broadly, a musician who cannot sustain commitment to a long-term artistic

vision across the months and years it takes to realize it will never produce work of real depth. Musical development, at every stage, requires the willingness to invest effort whose returns will not be immediate, and to trust that the investment is sound even when the evidence is not yet available.

The Integrated View

Taken together, these seven habits constitute a cognitive profile that is considerably more than the sum of its parts. Pattern recognition sharpens the perception of relationships; listening before acting ensures that perception is grounded in genuine attention; systems thinking extends that attention to the interactions between elements; comfort with ambiguity sustains engagement through the periods of uncertainty that serious thinking inevitably produces; structured creativity channels that engagement toward original solutions within real constraints; iterative improvement provides the mechanism through which solutions are refined over time; and long-term thinking supplies the temporal orientation without which none of the others can fully develop.

Each habit reinforces the others, and together they describe not merely how musicians think, but how any professional who has internalized the discipline of musical training tends to approach the world. Music does not produce these habits automatically or inevitably — it creates the conditions in which they can develop, for those willing to take seriously what the training is actually asking of them. That, perhaps, is the deepest argument for musical education that no examination score or performance assessment has ever quite managed to capture.



THE YOUNG STRAVINSKY AND HIS ENCOUNTER WITH DANCE

BY PAOLO TORTIGLIONE

Throughout history, music and dance have been inseparable. From ancient Greece, where theatrical performances included war dances such as the Prosodion and Enoplion and ritual dances like the Geranos, through the Middle Ages and Renaissance, dance remained central to musical culture. Treatises on dance date back more than five centuries, and countless compositions were written expressly for dancing or shaped by its rhythms and forms. Yet the scientific historiography of dance is relatively recent, developing only in the last century alongside anthropology and the social sciences. Dance as autonomous spectacle, and the music written for it, evolved differently across cultures, creating a vast and complex field of study.

What is certain is that the partnership between music and dance steadily intensified over time, producing collaborations that deeply shaped Western culture. At the dawn of the twentieth century, this relationship underwent a decisive transformation, largely due to Igor Stravinsky. More than any other composer, Stravinsky elevated music for dance to unprecedented artistic stature, redefining its expressive and structural possibilities.

Born in 1882 in Oranienbaum near Saint Petersburg, Stravinsky would become one of the most influential composers of the twentieth century. His works for dance are numerous and rank among the most important ever written. To understand his revolutionary impact, it is useful to retrace the stages that led him to his encounter with ballet.

Stravinsky began piano lessons around the age of nine at his father's insistence. His father was principal bass at the Imperial Opera in Saint Petersburg, and music was ever-present in the household. The young Igor proved exceptionally gifted, quickly mastering sight-reading and spending long hours improvising at the piano — an activity he later credited as fundamental to his development as a composer, despite frequent reprimands for wasting time. A decisive moment came when he attended a performance of Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* alongside his father. Stravinsky later described the opera as a monument of orchestral balance and clarity, praising its refined instrumentation, and the experience marked him deeply. Although a mediocre student academically, he became a passionate concertgoer as an adolescent, hearing leading performers and conductors

of the day, including Josef Hofmann, Leopold Auer, and Hans Richter. He encountered members of the Mighty Five, immersed himself in Wagner's music, studied counterpoint independently, and eventually began lessons with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov.

In 1902, Stravinsky discovered *Mir Iskusstva*, the journal founded by Sergei Diaghilev, which opposed academic conservatism and promoted artistic renewal. This encounter proved decisive. Under Rimsky-Korsakov's guidance, Stravinsky composed several early works, including *Le Faune et la bergère*, *Pastorale*, and *Feu d'artifice*. Performances of these pieces brought him into contact with Diaghilev, beginning a collaboration that would last nearly twenty years and profoundly shape both music and dance.

Diaghilev was impressed enough to commission Stravinsky to orchestrate two Chopin pieces for the ballet *Les Sylphides*. Shortly thereafter, in 1909, while Stravinsky was working on *The Nightingale*, Diaghilev invited him to compose the score for *The Firebird* for the 1910 season. He accepted — aware that the opportunity carried both immense prestige and considerable risk.

At the time, ballet music was widely regarded as an inferior genre among serious composers. Opera, having evolved into musical drama, retained cultural prestige, while ballet, though technically dazzling and commercially successful, was rarely admired for its music. Ballet scores were generally subordinated to choreography, providing pleasant, regular, and easily adaptable accompaniment rather than autonomous musical substance.

This hierarchy reflected nineteenth-century practice, especially in Russia, where choreographers exercised strict control over composers. Ballets were often assembled during rehearsals, with composers responding directly to choreographic needs. Aloisius Ludwig Minkus exemplifies this approach. Writing for Marius Petipa, Minkus frequently composed music at the piano while dances were being created, producing modular, repetitive, and easily alterable scores. Musical passages could be reused, cut, expanded, or replaced to suit dancers' abilities or theatrical demands, and music by other composers was often inserted without hesitation.





Even Tchaikovsky, despite his stature, was forced to revise scores at Petipa's request. When *Swan Lake* premiered in Moscow, its failure seemed to confirm the incompatibility of symphonic ambition with ballet. Yet this failure did not prevent the Imperial Theatres from commissioning *The Sleeping Beauty*, whose musical richness gradually altered perceptions of what ballet music could be. Its influence encouraged composers such as Glazunov and Arensky to write ballets with greater musical autonomy.

Stravinsky was keenly aware of this history when Diaghilev approached him. A ballet commission could easily relegate a young composer to the status of a craftsman producing decorative music. However, Diaghilev envisioned something different. His aim with *The Firebird* was to bring Russian folklore to Western Europe, drawing on fairy tales, legends, and songs preserved through oral tradition despite centuries of suppression.

Stravinsky also sensed that ballet itself was changing. A new generation of artists had emerged, led by choreographer Michel Fokine, a graduate of the Imperial Ballet Academy and soloist at the Mariinsky Theatre. Fokine sought to reform ballet by integrating music, movement, and narrative more organically. Around him were remarkable performers such as Anna Pavlova, Tamara Karsavina, and Vaslav Nijinsky. Stravinsky had seen Fokine's choreographies, including the *Polovtsian Dances* from *Prince Igor*, and was captivated by their expressive power.

Diaghilev had assembled a group of artists eager to experiment, and Stravinsky felt compelled to join them. During the winter of 1909–10, he worked intensively on *The Firebird*, collaborating closely with Diaghilev and Fokine. Significantly, the choreography was developed alongside the music, reversing the traditional hierarchy. Stravinsky attended rehearsals regularly, forging close relationships with Diaghilev and Nijinsky.

The premiere of *The Firebird* in 1910 was a resounding success. Conducted by Gabriel Pierné, with Karsavina in the title role, the production impressed audiences through the unity of music, dance, and design.

Although Stravinsky noted the inevitable tensions between musical and choreographic demands, the ballet marked a decisive step forward. The narrative followed traditional Russian ballet conventions: the hero Ivan encounters the Firebird, confronts the evil Kashchei, witnesses the Infernal Dance, and triumphs through love and magic.

Musically, *The Firebird* drew on Rimsky-Korsakov's colorful orchestration, enriched by chromatic harmonies reminiscent of Scriabin and the refined textures of Debussy and Ravel. Only in Kashchei's music does Stravinsky's distinctive voice emerge with forceful rhythms, stark timbres, and opposing tonal planes. Encouraged by success, Diaghilev intensified his international collaborations.



Meanwhile, Stravinsky traveled to Switzerland, where he conceived a new work inspired by a vivid vision: a puppet violently confronting an orchestra. This image became *Petrushka*. Although Diaghilev initially expected sketches for *The Rite of Spring*, he immediately recognized the power of the new idea and urged Stravinsky to develop it as a ballet. Based on a traditional fairground character, *Petrushka* tells the story of a puppet who comes to life and suffers human emotions. Stravinsky completed the score amid illness and intense work.

Rehearsals began in Rome in 1911, during celebrations of Italian unification. There, Stravinsky deepened his friendship with Nijinsky, whose interpretation of *Petrushka* combined technical brilliance with profound dramatic insight. Musically, *Petrushka* represents a radical advance. Its polychordal writing, rhythmic complexity, and layered tonalities were not designed to serve dancers' virtuosity but arose from purely musical logic. Instrumentation, form, and aesthetic conception broke decisively with tradition.

Stravinsky absorbed influences from impressionism and post-Wagnerian symphonism, yet forged a sharply modern language that sounded abrasive and unprecedented for its time. Stravinsky could have continued in the lush style of *The Firebird*, a safer and highly successful path. Instead, he chose risk and innovation. For him, music had to obey its own internal laws; external narratives were merely starting points. This conviction allowed his ballets to enter the symphonic repertoire, achieving autonomy beyond the stage.

This internal evolution led directly to *The Rite of Spring*. Its 1913 premiere, with its primitive choreography and violent rhythms, provoked scandal and disbelief. Yet the ballet permanently transformed both music and dance, laying the foundations of modernism and opening new expressive horizons. Stravinsky's contribution to dance thus extends far beyond his era. By redefining the relationship between music and movement, he expanded the expressive vocabulary of ballet and influenced generations of choreographers and composers. But that, as always, is another story.

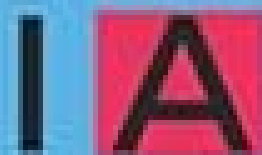


About the Author

Paolo Tortiglione collaborates regularly with choreographers, dance companies, and theater directors, as well as hosting various programs on Rai Radio3, where he has produced over 50 broadcasts. In addition to large-scale dance performances, his compositions have received awards in numerous international competitions and have been recorded by various labels.

He has taught at the conservatories in Turin and Milan, and currently holds this position at the Conservatorio San Pietro a Majella in Naples. As the author of dozens of articles and a book on Semiotics in four languages, and a contributor to *Treccani*, his scores are published by Volontè, Da Vinci, and Curci.

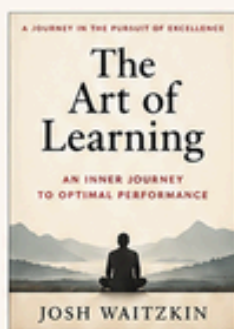
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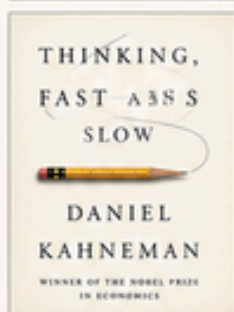
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Josh Waitzkin - Penguin Books, 2007

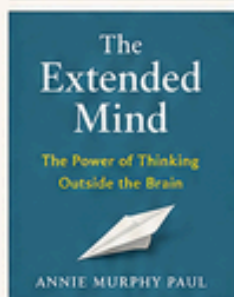
A fascinating exploration of how we learn and perform at our best—through focused attention, discipline, and a beginner's mind.



2 **Thinking, Fast and Slow**

Daniel Kahneman - Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011

The landmark book on how our minds work, why we make the decisions we do, and how we can think more clearly in a world of noise.



3 **The Extended Mind: The Power of Thinking Outside the Brain**

Annie Murphy Paul - Atria Books, 2021

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4 **Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know**

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5 **The Creative Act: A Way of Being**

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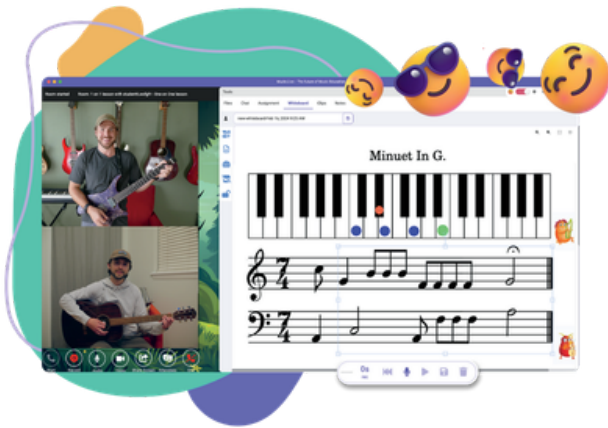


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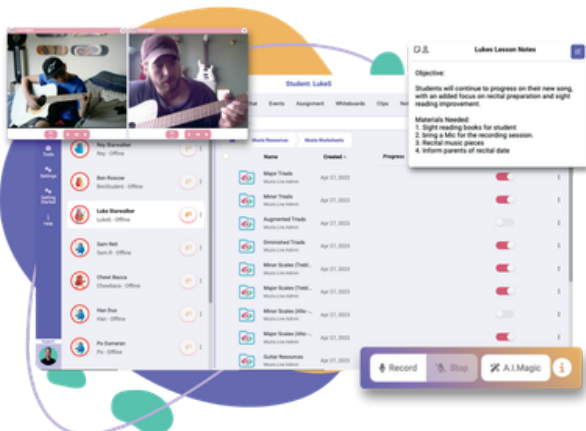


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IMPROVISATION AND THE ART OF UNCERTAINTY

BY CLARA VENTURI

What Musicians Can Teach Us About Thinking Without a Script

Few activities reveal the human mind at work as vividly as improvisation. Whether in a jazz club, an organ loft, a classroom, or a rehearsal room, improvisation places musicians in a situation that many people find deeply uncomfortable: they must act before they know exactly what will happen next. There is no complete script to follow, no guarantee that the next idea will succeed, and no opportunity to pause the flow of time while searching for the perfect solution.

And yet, for experienced improvisers, this uncertainty is not a threat to be managed or a problem to be solved before proceeding. It is the medium itself — the condition within which musical thought becomes possible, and from which musical meaning emerges.

This observation points toward a broader lesson about musical thinking and, by extension, about the nature of intelligent action in complex situations. Much of formal education encourages students to seek certainty before acting. We are taught to gather sufficient information, analyze the available options, and proceed only once the correct answer has been identified.

While this approach is often appropriate — and sometimes essential — it does not reflect the reality of many professional, creative, and human situations. Some problems cannot be solved before they are entered. They must be navigated from within, in real time, with incomplete information and no guarantee of success. Improvisation offers a powerful and underappreciated model for understanding how people learn to operate under precisely these conditions.

Listening as the First Skill

Popular imagination tends to portray improvisation as spontaneous invention — a musician effortlessly generating ideas in real time, unconstrained by rules or prior preparation, operating on pure instinct. The image is appealing, but the reality is considerably more interesting. Experienced improvisers understand, often without being able to articulate it explicitly, that improvisation begins not with speaking but with listening.

This lesson extends considerably beyond music, and its extension is not merely metaphorical. Many professional failures occur not because individuals lack expertise but because they respond before they have

adequately understood the situation — because they prioritize the expression of a prepared position over the perception of what is actually present. Effective improvisers demonstrate a different and more productive habit: they gather information continuously, treat attention as an active rather than passive process, and adjust their decisions as new understanding becomes available. They have learned, through years of practice under conditions that make the lesson impossible to avoid, that attention is not the opposite of action. It is the foundation of action, and the quality of the action is inseparable from the quality of the attention that precedes it.

The Myth of Perfect Preparation

Students observing experienced improvisers often assume that what they are witnessing is confidence — a kind of effortless certainty that produces fluent results. More often, what experienced improvisers actually possess is something subtler and more instructive: a fundamentally different relationship with uncertainty. They do not eliminate uncertainty before acting. They have learned to function productively despite it, and to trust that productive action is possible even in the absence of complete information or guaranteed outcomes. This distinction, which can be difficult to grasp from the outside, is one of the most consequential things that improvisational practice develops.

In many domains, individuals delay action while waiting for complete information, perfect conditions, or a level of certainty that complex environments rarely provide.

The capacity to move forward intelligently under such conditions is not recklessness, nor is it the exclusive province of unusual personalities. It is a learned skill — one that can be developed, practiced, and refined. Improvisation develops it by repeatedly placing musicians in situations where uncertainty cannot be avoided, where time does not stop to accommodate indecision, and where productive engagement with the unknown is not optional but structurally required by the activity itself.

One of the most persistent and misleading misconceptions about improvisation is that it represents freedom from structure — that the improviser operates in a space where conventions have been suspended and anything is permitted. In practice, the opposite is almost always true. Even the most experimental and apparently unconstrained forms of improvisation establish shared constraints — however unconventional — that make meaningful interaction between performers possible.

Structure does not inhibit creativity. Structure enables it, by providing the shared vocabulary without which communication collapses into noise and the resistance against which inventiveness has something to push against. The experienced improviser draws upon a vocabulary of patterns, gestures, and harmonic relationships that has been internalized through years of listening, study, and practice. Because that vocabulary has been thoroughly absorbed, it can be deployed flexibly and responsively in the moment, adapted to circumstances rather than applied mechanically to them. The lesson applies with equal force outside music: genuine innovation rarely emerges from the

absence of constraints but from a deep and honest engagement with existing structures, combined with the willingness — and the competence — to explore their possibilities from the inside. The most creative thinkers in any field are not those who reject frameworks entirely. They are those who understand frameworks well enough to work within them with maximum intelligence and imagination.

At its deepest level, improvisation may be less about creativity than about a particular kind of courage — not courage in any heroic or dramatic sense, but the quieter and more sustainable courage required to proceed without certainty, to begin before knowing exactly where the path leads, to trust preparation without demanding guarantees, and to remain present and engaged when outcomes cannot be fully controlled. Musicians who improvise learn, gradually and sometimes painfully, that uncertainty is not necessarily a signal that something has gone wrong. Often it is simply evidence that genuine discovery remains possible — that the situation has not yet been reduced to a known quantity, and that real thinking is therefore still required. The discomfort of not knowing, in other words, is not a problem to be eliminated at the first opportunity. It is frequently a sign that the most interesting part of the work is still ahead.



About the Author

Clara Venturi is a cultural critic and essayist with a background in musicology and journalism. After studying comparative literature and music history in Florence and Berlin, she began writing for European arts journals before moving into international feature writing. Her work focuses on the intersection of artistry, identity, and the institutions that shape creative careers. For MusicalQ, she contributes in-depth profiles and long-form essays on figures who redefine the landscape of classical music today.

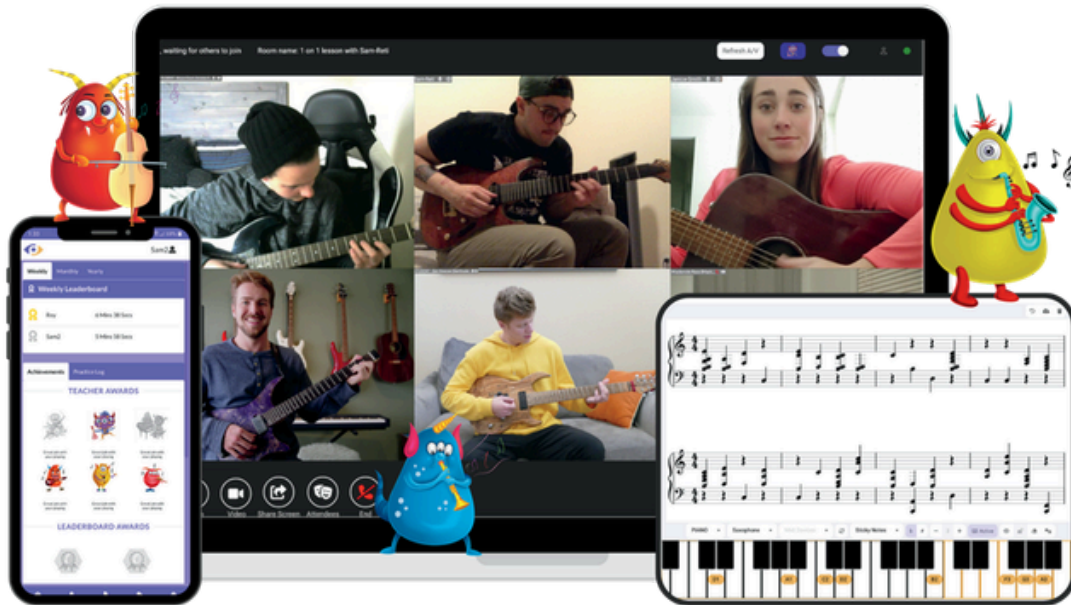


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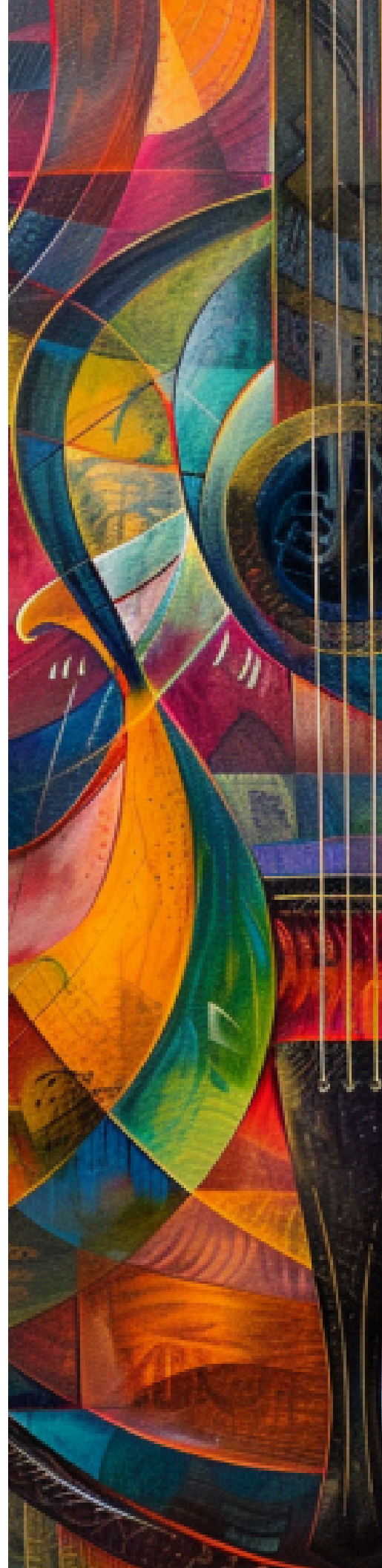
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GREEN ELEPHANT PRESS

THE ART OF LEARNING

AUTHOR: JOSH WAITZKIN
PUBLISHED: 2007 (FREE PRESS / SIMON & SCHUSTER)

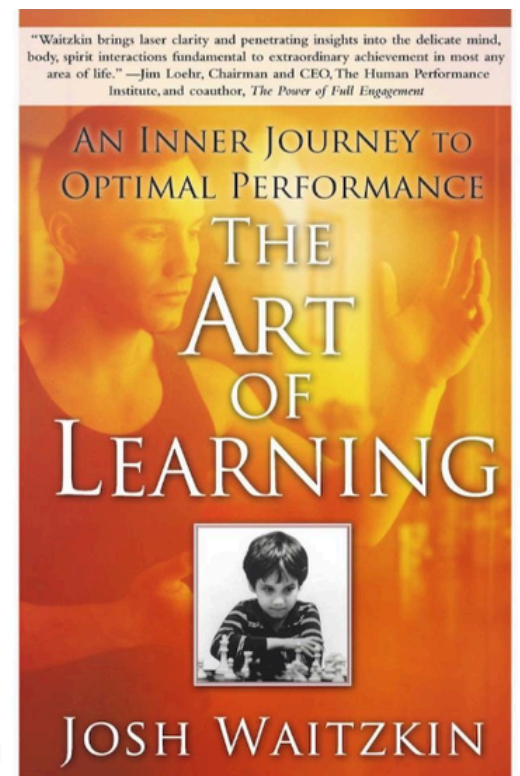
BY DR. ANTONELLA DI GIULIO

What does it mean to learn well?

At first glance, the question appears deceptively simple. Most educational systems focus on what students learn: scales, repertoire, historical facts, theoretical concepts, technical skills, or professional competencies. Far less attention is devoted to how learning itself occurs. Yet the distinction may be more important than it appears. Knowledge changes. Skills evolve. Repertoire is forgotten and replaced. The ability to learn, adapt, and continue growing remains.

This is the central concern of Josh Waitzkin's remarkable book, *The Art of Learning*. Waitzkin first came to public attention as a chess prodigy whose early life inspired the film *Searching for Bobby Fischer*. Later, he became a world champion in Tai Chi Push Hands, a discipline that appears unrelated to chess on the surface but that ultimately led him to investigate a deeper question: what principles govern excellence across different domains?

The resulting book is not a memoir in the conventional sense. Nor is it a self-help manual offering shortcuts to mastery. Instead, it is an exploration of the learning process itself, drawing insights from competition, performance, psychology, practice, and high-level skill development.



Many of the challenges Waitzkin describes are strikingly familiar. The tension between performance and preparation. The psychological effects of pressure. The relationship between technical refinement and artistic freedom. The necessity of sustained concentration. The gradual transition from conscious effort to intuitive fluency. Although his examples emerge primarily from chess and martial arts, the underlying principles translate naturally into musical practice.

One of the book's most compelling themes is the distinction between performance and learning. In competitive environments, individuals often become preoccupied with outcomes: winning, ranking, recognition, and external validation. While such goals can provide motivation, they may also distract from the deeper process through which expertise develops. Waitzkin repeatedly argues that genuine mastery emerges when attention shifts away from immediate results and toward continuous improvement.

Waitzkin's perspective offers a useful corrective. Excellence, he suggests, is not something achieved through obsession with outcomes but through commitment to process. The book also explores the role of discomfort in learning. Progress rarely occurs within the boundaries of existing competence. Growth requires individuals to engage repeatedly with situations that expose limitations, reveal weaknesses, and challenge established assumptions. Rather than avoiding these experiences, Waitzkin encourages readers to seek them out deliberately.

Particularly relevant to this issue is Waitzkin's discussion of what he calls "making smaller circles." The concept refers to the gradual compression of complex skills into increasingly efficient and intuitive forms. Through repeated practice, processes that initially require conscious effort become internalized and accessible under pressure. What appears effortless from the outside is often the product of years of careful refinement.

Pattern recognition, iterative improvement, long-term thinking, and comfort with uncertainty all depend upon precisely the kind of deep learning that Waitzkin describes. Expertise is not merely the accumulation of information. It is the transformation of information into intuition. Readers looking for quick solutions may find the book frustrating. Waitzkin offers no shortcuts, hacks, or guarantees. Instead, he presents a thoughtful examination of what sustained excellence actually requires and why genuine learning often unfolds more slowly—and more deeply—than contemporary culture prefers.

The greatest strength of *The Art of Learning* is that it reminds us that learning itself is a skill. Musicians spend much of their lives helping others learn while continuing to learn themselves. Yet we rarely pause to examine the process with the same curiosity that we bring to performance, analysis, or pedagogy. Waitzkin invites readers to do exactly that.

The most important lesson of the book may be that mastery is not defined by what we know, but by how we approach the continual process of becoming.

MUSICA IQ

THE SMARTER PATH TO MUSICAL GROWTH

ISSUE #8
JUNE 2026

HOW MUSICIANS THINK



MUSICIANS DON'T JUST HEAR MUSIC.
WE HEAR MEANING.



HOW MUSICIANS THINK

MUSICA IQ

ISSUE #8 JUNE 2026

A DAILY SYMPHONY OF OVERTHINKING

1. 5 MINUTES BEFORE PRACTICE

I should probably practice.



2. 30 SECONDS INTO PRACTICE

Why does this sound terrible today?

Was I better yesterday?

Am I even improving?



3. 5 MINUTES LATER

I should fix my technique.

No, my hand shape.

No, my mindset.

No, I need a new metronome.



4. WHEN SOMEONE PRAISES YOU

That was amazing!

They're just being nice.

They must not know how many mistakes I made.



5. WATCHING OTHER MUSICIANS

They're so talented. How are they so good?

I should practice more. (Or less and just give up...)



6. COMPOSING / WRITING

This is brilliant!

Wait... no, it's actually terrible.



7. RIGHT BEFORE A PERFORMANCE

I've practiced. I'm ready.

I'm not ready. What if I forget everything?



8. AFTER THE PERFORMANCE

I think it went well!

No, that one note was awful.

Everyone probably noticed.

I should never play again.



9. THE NEXT DAY

Can't wait to do it all over again.



WE OVERTHINK. WE CARE. WE PLAY.
THAT'S WHY IT MATTERS.



