

*Scintillating* baroque..



.. Serious **fun**



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Action! Action! Action!

## Accessing **Super-Creativity**: *May the **Flow** be with you!*

Many musicians, sportsmen and women, creative writers and composers know the special state of consciousness described by **Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi** as **Flow**. It's being 'in the zone', that 'Zen feeling'. It's related to Mindfulness. You're relaxed, but wonderfully concentrated on the task at hand; you feel quietly confident that you can manage it, you feel calmly exhilarated at the challenge it presents to you; you don't feel self-conscious, you are just 'there', in the moment, in the groove; in a certain way, Time seems to slow down, so that you can calmly take in all the incoming information, calmly make an elegant decision, and execute your response perfectly; your artistic intentions and your manual actions unite perfectly; you are working at high efficiency, but you could continue for hours without getting tired; you feel happy, even elated, yet somehow also calm.

It's a great feeling, and it is being in **Flow** that makes the crucial difference between an elite performer, musician, martial arts practitioner or sportsman and one who is merely ok. **Flow** is the ideal state not only for high performance, but also for the most effective learning. It is being in **Flow** that can lift any of us beyond the limits of our normal abilities. **Flow** seems to access something beyond the 'here and now', and may also be communicable between members of a team, between performers and audience. Perhaps the Star Wars metaphor of a mysterious Force uniting us all is not so far-fetched.

I suggest that in many disciplines we could teach **Flow** from the very first lessons, allowing students to make faster, deeper and more satisfying progress. Not just (for classical musicians) Technique and Interpretation or (for sportsmen) techniques and tactics, but (for anyone) how to get into **Flow** at whatever level of technical competence and interpretative insight.

There is exciting work already in progress about teaching **Flow** to musicians, some of which was discussed in a flurry of papers at the recent CMPCP conference in Cambridge. **Lazlo Stacho** (Liszt Academy, Budapest) is developing exercises to help classical musicians enter **Flow**. **Marcus Araujo** (University of Aveiro) is measuring whether or not musicians are indeed experiencing **Flow**, according to criteria based on Csikszentmihalyi's work. **Frank Heckman** is working with **Flow** with both elite sportsmen and music students. **Henrice Vonk** is looking at **Flow** and Mindfulness. In a properly cautious initial study, **Andrew Goldman** (Centre for Music & Science, Cambridge) has established measurable differences in cognitive processes when musicians are instructed to 'improvise'.

I hypothesise that **Flow** is an Altered State of Consciousness, which can be understood within the Griffin model of the REM-state. My aim is to build on existing work, and on my own experience of **Flow** as an elite performer (music) and elementary student (fencing), in order to develop exercises, teaching techniques, training conditions and rehearsal methodologies that facilitate entry into **Flow**.

I speculate that improvising may itself be a Gateway into **Flow**, as well as being an Indicator of the **Flow** state, and an Output that is enhanced by being in **Flow**. This links into my work on baroque gesture, where experiments in rehearsal seem to support the hypothesis that improvisation helps a performer 'own' the historical material, and increases the audience's readiness to 'believe' the gestures.

This seems to be part of a general tendency that would be consistent with Griffin's model of REM-state. I suggest that performance Outputs which are optimised by **Flow** will be found to correlate closely with characteristic Indicators of being in **Flow**, and also with Gateways into **Flow**. I hypothesise further that since the **Flow** state is itself 'paradoxical' (simultaneously focused and relaxed, active and observant, calm and elated etc), Gateways and Outputs will be similarly paradoxical.

There is ample evidence that successful induction techniques can include calming strategies or sudden calls for attention. I suggest that **Flow** Outputs might also reconcile what appear to be mutually exclusive elements: e.g. improvisations that have moments of spontaneous novelty and surprise, that are nevertheless fully 'correct' within the precise rules of a certain historical style.

Lack of (negative) self-consciousness is a characteristic of the **Flow** state. This should serve to warn us that awareness of being observed will tend to work against **Flow**. We should expect to find the 'quantum effect' at work: attempts to observe and measure these processes will certainly effect the process itself, and that effect will probably be negative. In the worst case, trying to observe **Flow** (perhaps with an elementary student), will destroy the **Flow** state we are trying to observe.

On the other hand, advanced practitioners are able to maintain a **Flow** state whilst simultaneously self-observing and commenting, as when an elite sportsman or musician performs a certain movement whilst simultaneously self-observing, commenting and teaching that movement to on-looking students. Indeed, this ability to dissociate and observe one's own performance as a 'detached observer' seems to be a characteristic of advanced familiarity with **Flow**.

Perhaps that too is one of the paradoxes of **Flow**. When one is in **Flow**, the state seems very strong, very stable. Yet if one is knocked out of **Flow** by some distraction, or when one is a beginner trying to get into **Flow**, the Gateway can be elusive.

I am confident that Griffin's model of the REM-state will structure a new understanding of the existing literature on trance induction to provide us with powerful new tools to allow all kinds of performers to navigate **Flow** more successfully.

There are powerful connections with Feldenkrais Method, which teaches a holistic awareness of mind-body-performance questions through quasi-meditative group sessions, and also with historical attitudes to Music as religious/cosmic and humanly embodied, not just sound (*Musica mundana, humana, instrumentalis*).