



A SERIES OF SHORT ARTICLES ON LIBERATING PERFORMERS

YOUR IN-BUILT VALUE SYSTEM AND PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

BY **DAVID GORMAN**
AND **DAVID ROBERTSON**

This series of short articles are based on the LEARNINGMETHODS™
work for performers developed by David Gorman.

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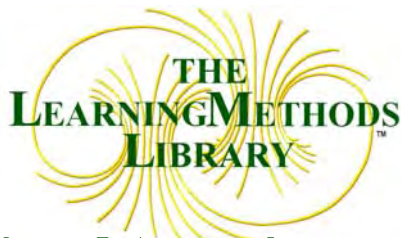
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YOUR IN-BUILT VALUE REGISTER

BY DAVID GORMAN

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You have an in-built value register. That is, at each moment in every activity you are registering the value to **you** of what you are experiencing.

Let's use a concrete example to illustrate. A person is out skiing and finds the following evaluations happening moment to moment:

- I *like* skiing (vs. *don't like* skiing)...
- It's *too cold* (vs. *too warm*, or *just right*)...
- That was a *bad* fall (vs. a *minor* spill)...
- It's *good* to keep trying (vs. *bad* to give up)...
- Skiing is *hard* (vs. skiing is *easy*)...
- Oh, that other skier is *pretty* (vs. *not pretty*)...
- I'm a *great* skier (vs. I'm *useless* at skiing)...
- That's *enough* skiing today (vs. *not enough*)...
and so on...

Your day is full of these automatic assessments of what you like and don't like, what's good for you and what isn't, who you like and who you don't like. Your value register gives you essential feedback from your system — feedback that comes to you automatically.

It's your way of knowing what works for you and what doesn't. Without it you'd have no way to make appropriate choices and navigate your life successfully.

BUT, too often we mistake the situations we are in and the valuing system reacts as if there was a threat or a problem, leading us into anxiety, nervousness, self-judgment, or being caught in what others think.

Regardless of whether we mistake the situation, the reactions we have are real reactions and so it doesn't take long until the mistaken way we see things starts to seem very real to us ("they really are thinking that, and it really is fearful, and I really am not good enough"). By that time we are truly caught in a vicious circle and will end up suffering these reactions over and over.

However, once you understand how the valuing system works, you can escape this circle and be free of these reactions forever! For this to happen, though, you first need to be clear about what goes into any value assessment moment. Understanding these elements will enable you to take in the situation more accurately and therefore have a different response.

The Four Elements of any Value Assessment

- 1) The valuer — *the person doing the assessing or making the evaluation;*
- 2) That which is being valued — *a person, a thing, or an activity which is being evaluated;*
- 3) The evaluation response itself — *good/bad, like/don't like, boring/interesting, beautiful/ugly, etc.*
Most people would stop there: someone evaluates something and up comes the evaluation (e.g. I listen to the concert and think, "what a good singer"). But there is a fourth and essential element which most people do not even consider, namely:
- 4) The criteria used for making the evaluation

Example: Five friends go off to a singer's solo recital and afterwards have a discussion about whether the singer was "good" or "bad". Three people thought he was good, and two thought he was bad, as if "good" or "bad" were properties of his singing.

The discussion turns into an argument about whether he is good or bad until eventually everyone sees that they are not adding in the criteria for their judgement. One thought the singer was good because he was better than the beginner voice students she teaches each day. One thought he was bad in comparison to the best singer he had ever heard. One thought he was good because she got carried away by the songs into a dreamy reverie. One thought he was good because she found him cute, and one was actually thinking about the recital not the singer and thought it was bad because he did not like that style of music.

Once the criteria are taken into account it makes perfect sense why each person reached their own particular value assessment. Yes, you could say, this just shows that there are different opinions or points of view. True, however there is more to it than that.

What this reveals is that there are a number of serious misconceptions in how most people understand and react to these value assessment situations. Let's go through them one by one.

Misattributing where the evaluation comes from

The evaluation (or value response) is rarely mistaken. It is just what it is — you don't mistake the feeling. But what we do almost always mistake is where that feeling comes from. We usually perceive it as if the value assessment (good, bad) is a property of what is being evaluated (the singer) in the same way that an adjective describes its noun: a black shirt, a good singer. However, this cannot be so, otherwise everyone would come to the same evaluation response. Can a singer be simultaneously both a good and bad singer? Can someone be beautiful and not beautiful at the same time? This makes no sense.

Beauty is not a property of the person being looked at. The perception of beauty is determined by the criteria of the person looking — "I think she's beautiful because she matches my criteria for beauty, but you don't think she's beautiful because you have different tastes". As the saying goes: *beauty is in the eye of the beholder*.

In the example above we had five different criteria from different people leading to different responses even though each of the 5 people was evaluating the same recital. While there does have to be something or someone being evaluated, the actual value response which occurs is NOT a property of what is being valued, it is a consequence of the criteria being used — different criteria, different responses.

Notice that it is the criteria of the valuer that give rise to the evaluation experience, and that evaluation response is experienced by the valuer. In other words, when you go to hear someone at a concert or you meet someone new at a party, it is your criteria that are applied to them and you are the one who gets a value response back which tells you the value of that concert or that person *to you*.

Mistaking what is being evaluated

There are other common misconceptions or misattributions. What is being valued can also easily be mistaken. When you perform and begin to feel judged, what exactly is being judged? When you think about it for a moment it cannot be anything but the specific performance you are giving at that present moment — not last week's performance or any future performance, but just the one right now.

But ask yourself how often it seems to you as if your whole ability and competence as a performer is at stake and is being called into question? Or have you ever felt like it was a judgement of *you*, your own worth as a human being? If so, then you'll know that mistaking what is being evaluated adds greatly to the intensity of your reaction. After all, what is worse: to fear having one moment judged inadequate; to fear having your whole career judged inadequate; or to fear being judged worthless as a person?

Mistaking the valuer

Another common mistake concerns who is doing the valuing (the valuer). At the moment you are getting nervous, you may think it is because of how others are judging you, but if you look closely you'll see that you do not know precisely who, if anyone, is actually judging you. And even if they were judging you, you do not know for sure whether it is a positive or negative judgement (though, of course, we don't usually get nervous about positive judgement).

In fact, notice that you did not start to get nervous until *you* started to think about "them" and their judgement. You can even get nervous about "their" judgement hours or days before a performance when "they" are obviously not judging you at all!

The reality is that you get nervous when *you* start to try to get into their valuing systems. It is not them making you nervous. It is your own thinking — actually, your own *imagining* — of other people judging you. In other words, it is *you judging yourself*, but projecting the judgement out as if it was coming from others.

It is imagination, because, of course, you cannot really use anyone else's value register for the simple reason that you are not them and therefore you are not in touch with what their criteria are. Only they know their own personal criteria and only they know what kind of day they had, and what they are thinking and feeling at the moment, which all colours their own pre-existing criteria.

Example: A singer gets all flustered when she sees two people leave the concert hall suddenly — she thinks they have judged her as not worth listening to. What has really happened is that they are both feeling sick from a dodgy meal they ate before the concert and have to make a hasty exit.

It is not so much that you are trying to do the impossible (getting into someone else's value register), but rather, that while you are busy with this you will not be using your own value register. Your own value register does not tell you what others think, or how perfect your performance was, or whether you are a good singer. It has been quietly registering everything that you have

already found valuable. Amongst other things, it tells you whether you enjoy being a musician, whether you enjoy performing (when you are not caught up in all this mistaken judgement stuff), what you have registered about the music that is valuable, beautiful, moving. In other words, all the things you do really need to stay present with to perform well. And precisely all the things that you have already experienced being present with when things have gone well and been fun for you. There is more about this in part 4 of this series, *On "Perfection"*.

Not being clear about the criteria

Another common mistake is more one of omission than of misconception or misattribution. Because we so often assume that the value judgement is a property of what is being valued (i.e. the person has a property called "being beautiful") we are usually not at all clear about what, if any, criteria are being used in our value assessments.

We just think, "*Was I good?*" without pausing to ask, "*good in relation to what or whom?*". Was I good in comparison to a top-notch recording (which may well have been digitally enhanced)? Or to a fellow musician who is more experienced (and how can that be a fair comparison)? In comparison to my very best practice session (which I have cherry-picked only from my ideal moments)? Was I good in other musicians' eyes (who may themselves be insecure and happy to bring someone else down)? Or in the critics' opinion (and what are *their criteria*)?

As you become more aware of these anxious judgement moments you will begin to be able to "wake up" and ask yourself: "*what criteria am I using now?*". If you are like a lot of people, you will find that you are not very clear at all.

This leads us to the next question. What we can do to be more clear and accurate about these value assessment moments and thus avoid the problems?

How to use the four Value Register elements

As you realise not only how common it is to misunderstand the situation and misattribute the value assessments, but also how much you suffer by doing so, it would be good if you had a simple and clear way to test whether you are seeing a situation accurately and thus responding appropriately. Here's what you can do.

Any time you find yourself in a "value assessment" moment (and you can use the symptoms you may be experiencing — nervousness, anxiety, feelings of failure or inadequacy — to wake you up to these moments) take a moment to see if you remember these four elements and plug the specific details of the moment into each of the elements. This will reveal whether you have misperceived or misattributed one or more of these elements and will allow you to correct them so that you are taking in the situation more accurately, allowing your value system to then respond to the actual situation.

As you begin to be in the present moment, as it really is, you'll no longer be reacting as you did before. You will be free to be yourself, just as you are, with all your skills, in all parts of your life.

Remember, it is *your* value register, there to register the value *for you* of the situations and people in *your* daily life. It is no coincidence that *your value register* uses *your criteria* to evaluate these moments, and that the consequent value response shows up in *your experience* not someone else's. This is how you stay *in touch with yourself* and make choices so that *your life* works *for you*.

Want to read more?

There is an articulate and personal article on this topic by a LearningMethods teacher, Elizabeth Garren, called "*Good For Whom?*" which is available as a web page or as a free e-book downloadable from the LearningMethods web site at: www.learningmethods.com/goodforwhom.htm.



ON “SHOWING OFF” BY DAVID ROBERTSON

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We can often be unwilling to really “go for it” when we’re performing in front of others for fear that we’ll be labeled “stupid” or a “show off” (or worse!). It’s worth taking a look at some of the logic behind this. There are a number of questions we can ask:

What exactly do you mean, or what do you think others might mean, by “showing off”?

The definition my students usually come up with is something like “thinking you are better at something than you actually are”, “being arrogant”, or “Look at me, look how good I am!”

Are you actually “showing off”?

When you go for it in performance, are you actually thinking all those thoughts above or are you simply trying to have fun and get into the music/drama/character/emotion? Most students I know just want to have fun and enjoy the performance, and are actually quite humble about their particular level of skill or accomplishment!

Are you sure people will think that you are showing off?

As you can see from the “In-built value register” sheet, it’s important to be clear on the criteria people use to form their opinions. We often assume that everyone is using the same criteria as us and that they’re all thinking the same thing! To keep things in perspective, remember that there is no such thing as an audience, they are all individuals, with their own individual thoughts, feelings, and perhaps most importantly, their own individual criteria as to what they like and don’t like. Also, if you were in an audience and saw someone really “going for it”, would you think they were showing off, or would you think “good on you for having a go!”. Of course, some people may actually think that you are showing off so we haven’t quite solved the problem yet!

If some of them actually do think you’re showing off, does that actually say anything about you?

Again, as we’ve seen, there is a real danger of “mis-attribution” here. If someone thinks, according to their own criteria, that you are “showing off”, notice that the label of “showing off” only really tells us something about that person’s criteria, and really nothing about you at all, although that is probably not how they will see it. Most people make the mistake of thinking that the value assessment is a property of the thing/person being valued, not of their own criteria:

Example: Someone might think that a cake is tasty, projecting out their opinion as if the tastiness is a *property* of the cake. In fact the experience of “tastiness” is in the person eating the cake, *not* in the cake itself, just as another person might experience “yuckiness” when eating exactly the same cake! There is actually no such thing as an inherently *tasty* cake, because if there was, everyone in the world would find it tasty!

So, some people might actually put the label “show-off” onto you. Of course this doesn’t make much sense at all, because another person might have quite different criteria around performance and think that seeing someone “go for it” is brilliant, and label you as “brave”. So, which are you, brave or a show-off? Of course you are really neither, the labels don’t tell us anything about you or your singing, but they do tell us about those people’s criteria. So, while some people may make the mistake of projecting the label onto you, as if it really says something about you, given that they don’t really know at all what you’re thinking, how could they be sure that you’re actually “showing off”? This would also create difficulty for themselves as they would most likely then be fearful of other people “labelling” them!

But what if their criteria actually make sense?

Here we need to ask what kind of criteria a person would need to be using in order for your actions to seem like “showing off” to them. First of all, notice that people tend to fear being labeled a show-off much

more if they "go for it" than if they just kind of do the bare minimum and actually seem kind of apologetic for even being up on stage! So there seems to be some kind of link between "enjoyment" and actual (or perceived) skill level (how well you do something). When we look at the whole area of "high standards" or "perfection" (see the article "On Perfection") we see that many people really believe that:

"you're not allowed to have fun with something or express yourself unless you're brilliant!"

Of course, if this were actually true, no two-, three-, or four-year-olds would ever have fun dancing or singing or pretending to be a cowboy or princess or, well, anything much! In fact, the way these people see things, they would only really "go for it" or "let go" once they felt they could more or less guarantee NO mistakes would happen in their own music-making.

KIDS THINK: "I love doing this, let's do it!"
(and so they do it lots and, as a bonus, get better and better and move *towards* perfection, but, in the meantime are *PERFECTLY* happy!

ADULTS THINK: "I will love doing this, once it's perfect!" (and so they feel inadequate because it's *not* perfect yet (whatever that even means!?), and get frustrated and *try* harder and harder and get in their own way and have no fun, and end up thinking they're a "slow learner" and "no good" and therefore do even worse than they would otherwise, and end up feeling *PERFECTLY* miserable!

So, given the way these people see things, once they see you "going for it" (i.e. having a great time and having lots of fun!), and once they notice that you're not *actually* perfect, something doesn't compute for them! Their thought process would be something like this:

"he's having a great time, but only people who are already brilliant are allowed to have a great time, and he's *not* that brilliant, because there are some mistakes there. He must *think* he's brilliant! What a deluded, stupid, arrogant, show-off!"

And they will project all of that onto you, *as if* it really says something about you, because, in their mind, the only way any of what they're seeing would make sense would be if you *actually did think you were brilliant*. It probably doesn't even occur to them to ask you what you're actually thinking at all!

And, sadly, the extent to which that way of thinking seems to make sense to them is pretty much the extent to which they will *NOT* enjoy performing themselves for

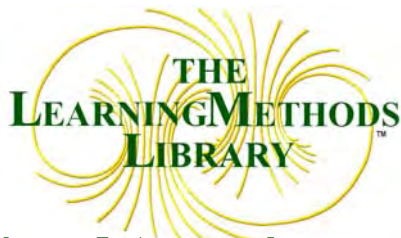
fear that others will label *them* "stupid" or a "show-off", which, in their minds, would *actually* say something about them.

Once you begin to really understand the viciousness of this circle it becomes easy to see why so many people *really* suffer genuine fear, anxiety, stage-fright, self-doubt, feelings of inadequacy, and so on.

But, remember that this vicious circle feeds upon *misunderstanding*, and as you begin to be able to question your own ideas and beliefs about all of this, you will begin to realize that the only people whose thoughts and opinions you might ever have feared are the very people who are all caught up in this big tangled mess of fear and misunderstanding themselves.

And no matter how much they project their confused ideas onto you, and, yes, perhaps even criticize and judge, you will be able to see right through all of it, see that it is simply a reflection of them and their mixed-up ideas!

Then comes the good stuff: **you can finally start to move towards a clear-sighted, exciting understanding of how humans *actually* learn and how much joy the whole process can give you!**



ON “MISTAKES” BY DAVID ROBERTSON

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In my experience, there are a number of common misconceptions surrounding the concept of mistakes. Let’s look more closely at this:

What is a “mistake”?

The most common definition given by my students is along these lines: “something you do wrong”. If we look at this apparently sensible definition in more detail we can quickly uncover a number of misconceptions. Is a mistake actually something we do or is it something that happens? Well, we certainly don’t decide to make a mistake in the same way we might decide to make a cup of tea for example. In fact, by its very nature we only notice a mistake once it has actually happened. So a mistake is something that happens, not something we do. Then we have this interesting idea of wrong. Well, there are a couple of different types of wrong!

- Somebody may listen to your performance and simply not like how you are singing/acting etc., or may think that you are doing it “wrong”, that you are “making a mistake” in how you are interpreting the music. If this person has a lot more experience regarding that particular style of music, they may well be able to give you tips as to how to deepen your understanding of it, but it wouldn’t make sense to say you were “making a mistake” if you hadn’t yet had the chance to learn about all those other possibilities. Alternatively they might just not like your performance! This is simply a reflection of their own personal taste, although they may project their assessment out onto you as if it actually says something about your singing.
- Something inaccurate might happen simply because we have not yet learned all the necessary co-ordinations to accurately perform the music. This often happens, of course, when we are studying a new piece of music.
- Something inaccurate might happen because we get distracted by certain thoughts as we perform. Our actual co-ordination is very different when we get caught up in anxiety about what people might think if we “make a mistake”! Isn’t it ironic that the very worry that a mistake might happen actually makes it more

likely that a mistake will happen! Of course we might also simply get distracted because we see someone cute in the audience!

If you have read the “*Your In-built Value Register*” article you will realise that the first of these three is not much of an issue, and that while it might seem like a nice thing if everyone loved how you perform, they will like or not like things depending on their own criteria, criteria to which you have no access, and which in any case say nothing whatsoever about you or your performance. This whole area of getting caught up in other people’s criteria and assessments can lead to some interesting questions such as “why do we perform?”, “who do we sing for?”, “why do we feel we need the approval of others to make our singing somehow valid?”. Once we see through the misconceptions that get us caught up in other people’s criteria we can actually begin to discover what our own criteria are, what we like, and how to enjoy singing using *our own* value register!

The second scenario simply describes the fact that while people are learning new skills, mistakes often happen. For some reason students often think of this as a bad thing, or somehow wrong. So, if we take our more accurate definition of a mistake as “something inaccurate that you don’t intend to happen”, let’s see what happens if we plug it into a learning situation.

Example: Imagine a small child learning to stand or take its first steps. The child will fall over quite a few times before it “learns” to stand or walk. In any of those moments that the child falls on its bum, it does not *intend* to fall, it does not do the falling, but the falling certainly *happens*. If the ultimate goal of the child is to walk over to its mum or dad, then this falling over is *not accurate* as the child has not achieved its intended goal. So, according to our criteria of what constitutes a mistake, this child has *made a mistake!*

This, of course, doesn’t make any sense at all, and the word *mistake* is pretty meaningless in that context, or at least couldn’t really have any negative connotations. In

fact, let's look at it even more closely and see how the learning actually works. As the child falls over, the brain receives lots of information from all the balance and sensory systems and then processes that information so that its next attempt at standing/toddling will be *a little more accurate*. Without this *sensory feedback* the brain would have no way of making its next attempt more accurate! Take away the *falling over* and you take away the *feedback*. Take away the *feedback* and you take away any chance of making the next attempt *more accurate*. Take away the "mistake" and learning simply becomes impossible, because *the "mistake" happening is the learning process in action!*

Example: Imagine a well-meaning mother who is certain her child is too bright to make mistakes and therefore thinks the little one shouldn't fall over, or "make mistakes" as it learns to walk. If she uses a harness or stands behind and holds the child up, do you see what the problem would be? The child's system would be literally starved of feedback and therefore couldn't use that information to make further, slightly more accurate attempts at standing or walking. It would eventually "learn" to stand, but in a way that was not so deeply integrated, nor so free. And it would also have been subtly "taught" that the goal (standing) is more important than the process (learning) and thus that "mistakes" are bad!

It is also important to ask here: as a child makes its first attempts at toddling *is it even trying to "learn" something at all?* Or is the child simply curious and having fun and wanting to go see its mummy on the other side of the room? It's very unlikely that the child is thinking "Jeez, I have to get this *walking* thing down and then move on to colouring in and talking and stuff!" Of course, if the child actually *isn't trying to learn* it would lead us to a pretty important conclusion:

Learning is a property of your human nature. As long as humans are interested, curious, and having fun, learning will happen!

At this point a student will often say something like, "That's all very well, but I have high standards, I want to play the very best I can, so *why not* strive for perfection!?" These ideas are looked at in detail in the article "On Perfection".

Now let's move on to look at the third scenario, where something goes wrong in performance that doesn't usually go wrong in practice. There are two questions to ask here:

Why is something more likely to go wrong in front of others if it doesn't usually go wrong in practice?

The very fact that we may be nervous about a mistake happening would of course make it more likely that a mistake will actually happen, simply because the extent

to which we are distracted by all the thoughts and worries and perceived consequences of a mistake happening is the extent to which our co-ordination will suffer and make it more likely that a mistake will *actually* happen! Now that's a pretty vicious circle to be stuck in! There is, however, something very important to learn from those other moments where these mistakes simply don't happen. Our experience actually shows us that, once we have learned a piece of music, and if we're *not* really worried about mistakes happening, *mistakes tend not to happen!*

Before we move on to the next question, then, let's be clear that pretty much the *only* thing making it more likely that mistakes will happen in this situation is the fear/worry/anxiety that mistakes will happen. So we need to reach a clear understanding of how we are seeing the situation that would be *causing* that fear. If we see that our "take" of the situation is not accurate, and we are able to come to a more accurate understanding of the situation, the fear will simply not be there and the cause of these mistakes will simply not be there and so the mistakes themselves will *simply not be there!* So, let's look at our next question:

Why does it seem to matter more if something goes wrong, or a mistake happens in front of others?

There seem to be two main areas of concern here – what *others* will think if you make mistakes, and what *you* will think if you make a mistake (even if nobody else notices!). The answer to both of these areas is very much tied in to the whole concept of "perfection", so please also see the relevant article.

Ok, what *will* people think if we "make mistakes", "mess up", "screw up", "make a hash of it" ... or worse! Well, first of all, even though logic would tell us that individual audience members would each have different thoughts and reactions, notice that, in the actual moment of performance, we tend to *actually* experience it *as if everyone* noticed the mistakes and *they all* thought it was really terrible! So, although there might be some people who really will think like that, let's leave them for a second and at least get a little perspective. Do people actually go to concerts *just* to pick over your every note, *just* to listen for all the mistakes? Or do they actually go to enjoy themselves, have fun, feel good, feel some emotion, and listen to some nice music?! And think about it – if *you* were in an audience, which would you enjoy more?:

- a performance where all the words and notes are spot on and the voice even sounds quite nice to you, but where the singer is so terrified *in case they make a mistake (!)* that they completely tense up, have no fun, and have to concentrate fully on getting all the notes and words right so can't get into the mood or character of the piece at all!

- *or*, a performance where most of the words and notes are there and the voice may or may not be quite your cup of tea, but where the singer is completely *at ease* and is therefore totally able to immerse him/herself in the mood and character of the song, to really *live* the song!

Instinctively the second kind of performance would make it much easier for us to enjoy ourselves, chiefly because *the singer* is having a great time! And would you *really* prefer to see a six-year-old fiddle player almost in tears as they *try* to make sure they don't play any wrong notes in front of an audience, or the same six-year-old having brilliant fun with the spirit of the piece, with a few "funky" notes thrown in (and perhaps with a chance of actually *still playing* fiddle when they grow up!). Notice that this all comes back, once again, to the enjoyment/skill level link that we saw in the article "*On Showing Off*".

Falling Apart

Many of us, however, wouldn't mind if only a couple of mistakes happen, we don't mind if it's not perfect, as long as it doesn't all completely fall apart! Let's assume that we have actually learned a piece to a standard where it doesn't usually fall apart! If the *falling apart* happens only in front of others let's look at how the process would actually work.

Example: *How to fall apart!*

"I'm performing a piece of music in front of some people and I'm worried that a mistake might happen. In fact, I'm so worried that I start to *try to make sure* I sing everything really well. I get tight and tense because of all this *making sure* and ... oh, oh, there it is, that high note didn't sound any good! Oh, what'll they think, oh I hope nothing else goes wr... ah! I've forgotten the next line! Oh no! it's getting worse and worse, and I'm starting to panic, and I know if I panic it'll all fall apart and they'll all think I'm terrible and ... oh no, it's all falling apart! Aarrgghh!

The first link in the chain of events that leads to the eventual *falling apart* is the first mistake, a mistake which, remember, was probably made more likely by our anxiety. But the mistake itself is not the problem, it's what we think the mistake *means* that is the problem (notice, for example, that the first mistake wouldn't be nearly as big a deal if you were on your own). Now, just imagine a situation where that first mistake happens and it doesn't even really matter at all. This might be difficult for you to imagine, depending on how you see things, but there are and always have been performers for whom a mistake happening really isn't a big deal. So, if a mistake happening wasn't even a big deal, you wouldn't get caught into the downward spiral shown in the

example above and the subsequent mistakes wouldn't happen and so it wouldn't all *fall apart!*

However, there may actually be some people among the audience who actually *do* think that any mistakes are terrible and that they should never happen and that unless your performance is perfect (whatever their idea of perfect might be) it has no value whatsoever! Hmm, now this is a pretty extreme case, and in the past, the fear that there may actually be someone listening to you who actually thought this way, might have been enough to cause all sorts of mayhem in your performance!

This is where we really have to answer another question: *What exactly is perfection?*



ON “PERFECTION” BY DAVID ROBERTSON

*This is part of a series of short articles which are based on the LEARNINGMETHODS™ work for performers developed by David Gorman, whose input and suggestions are gratefully acknowledged.
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Many students have ideas like “I want to do the best I can”, “I just want it to be perfect”, or “I’m trying to make it perfect”. Before we look at ideas like “best” and “perfect” however, let’s get a little clearer on the other parts of those phrases, “I want” and “I’m trying to”.

“I just want it to be perfect”.

This is often the mantra of the “perfectionist”! But is this actually what they mean? Is it really a case of “want” or “would like” in the same way you might *want* a cup of coffee? There certainly wouldn’t be any fear or worry associated with *not* getting the coffee! So it may not be “I *want* it to be perfect” so much as “I won’t be happy *unless* it’s perfect”, or “I’m worried that it *might not* be perfect”. This, of course, is a much less easy-going state of affairs!

“I’m trying to do it the best I can”

There are certain words that indicate something unclear in the way we see things. One of these interesting red-flag words is the word “try”. In any given moment there are things we *can* do and other things we *can’t* do (but which sometimes we nevertheless still “try” to do). Our ability to be able to carry out certain activities will change, often quite radically, from moment to moment, depending on how we feel and certainly on how we are seeing things. Many of us have had the experience of things not going quite as well in performance as they did in practice:

First of all, notice that the way we are seeing things is vastly different from one situation to the next, but our concept of *the best we can do* remains the same! We’re not really seeing that *the best* is simply *the best we can do in any given moment*, given the particular circumstances of that situation, or, more accurately, *how we are seeing that situation*. Our physical co-ordination is different when we are anxious and worried than when we are not, and this will result in a different standard of singing. We will not always sing *the best we ever did* (i.e. that *one* time in practice), but *the best we can* in this moment, given what’s

going on for us in this moment. Ironically, the *harder* we try to capture some previous or *ideal* or *perfect* moment, the *less* ease and freedom we will experience, bringing *this* moment down even further!

In practice: “I’m playing this piece and I’m quite happy with it. The notes are pretty much all there, in fact it even seems in certain moments that the music is really flowing, I’m not really *doing* anything much. Yep, that’s pretty much *the best* I can play it. Let’s go perform!”

In performance: “Jeez, I hope *they all* like this, and I don’t *mess up*. I’ve got to *try* to play *my best* here and *try* to *make sure* I don’t make any mistakes! But my head’s getting a bit muddled, and they’re all hearing that it’s not going *well enough compared to how it went in practice*. I’m not playing *my best*, I have to *try harder!*”

“But I have high standards/high expectations for myself”

Many students take for granted that it is a *good* thing to have high standards or high expectations of themselves. If we consistently achieve those high standards then there simply isn’t a problem, but all too often, we feel frustration at *not* being able to achieve those standards. In these moments *reality* is showing us that, no matter what standard we think we *should* be achieving, we are *actually* achieving a different standard. In that moment, our so-called “high” standard is literally a “higher than I can actually do” standard! The standard we have in mind might be there because of a previous experience of achievement in practice or may just be a totally unclear, made up idea, based on a recording we’ve heard, for example. Either way, the fact remains that in that moment we are actually singing at the standard we are singing at, and no other! The real meaning behind certain phrases then becomes clearer:

"I have high standards" (higher than I can actually achieve)

"I expect a lot from myself" (more than I can actually do)

"I'm tough on myself" (I'm trying to do more than I can, and am tough on myself when I don't achieve that)

It is not accurate to attribute our frustration to our *failure* to achieve our high standards, since "stubborn" reality shows us time and again that those standards are literally *unrealistic*.

We think the negative feelings we experience are because of our *failure* to achieve our high standards. This is a misunderstanding of the actual significance of those experiences.

The negative feelings we experience are actually coming from the "too-high" standard, i.e. the negative feelings are our systems' way of showing us how it actually feels to be *out of touch with*, and constantly *fighting against* REALITY.

It is also a sad irony that the negative state we find ourselves in when we labour under this misapprehension is pretty much guaranteed to bring the *actual* standard we *can* achieve even further down.

But if we can begin to let things be as they actually are (just because that actually *is* how they are whether we like it or not!) we shouldn't assume that nothing will change! We've all probably experienced wonderful moments where we have been in the flow of the music, where it felt like the music was *happening*. The defining characteristic of these moments, in terms of what we are doing, is that we are doing absolutely nothing at all to try and change anything!

You cannot achieve a state of *letting things happen*, by *trying to do something* to achieve that state!

"But if I just let it be what it is, it might fall apart!"

Well, of course we all might fall apart at any moment! But things are much less likely to fall apart if we are not constantly fighting reality and getting our system's co-ordination all wound up! In fact, the moments where we are able to just let things be, and enjoy them for what they are, are the moments where our wonderful human system is free to show just what it really can do, and things don't actually tend to fall apart at all! Also, in those moments the "wonderfulness" is all to be found in the *flow* of the music, in that experience of just being carried along, of *letting* it be whatever it simply is. The fact that the music may then also sound wonderful is simply a *result* of that process!

On the other hand, what if it actually did completely fall apart? Let's be clear that our performance completely

falling apart would only actually be a problem if we believe there is a causal link between the skill level with which we carry out an activity and our enjoyment of the activity (i.e. the "better" we do it, the more we enjoy it). To address this we must address our ideas about the meaning of perfection.

What is the meaning of "perfect"?

If we can meaningfully answer this question we will be able to free ourselves from one of the single biggest *misconceptions* most of us labour under. When I ask my students to define perfection they often say something like "when everything is right". But, of course, this is merely swapping one label, "right", for another, "perfection". Some other typical definitions are:

- When all the notes and words are right
- When everyone likes it
- When I think it's good enough for me

But these definitions present all sorts of problems too. What if the notes and words are right but there is no emotion? Right for who? What if everyone has different criteria for what they like and don't like? What if they all like it and I don't? What if it's good enough for me but not for anyone else? The more we look at these criteria the less sense they make, and we begin to see just how *vague* a concept "perfection" is to many of us.

Also, intrinsic to all of the above definitions is that they focus on the *result* of the music-making process and not the *process itself*. This of course makes it a little ironic that, in order for any of these definitions of perfection to apply, our performance would need to already be complete before we could decide whether we had fulfilled the criteria! You can only, for example, judge whether all the notes were right once the piece is actually finished. So, by these kinds of results based definitions, **even if our singing was perfect, we could only begin to enjoy singing once we had already finished singing!** And this is indeed some people's actual experience of performance. They are so caught up in the *result* of their singing that the only thing they ever really get the chance to enjoy is the audience reaction once they've finished!

There is, however, another way of thinking about perfection, a way which becomes clearer if we ask a question about an interesting contrast between our current and previous experiences of singing and making music.

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Now that's an interesting one! If your criteria for perfection actually were "*when it's good enough for me*", this would mean that the audience's reaction would be irrelevant to you (i.e. as long as it's good enough for you their opinions simply don't count). But if the opinions of those in the audience were unimportant for you, you simply would never get nervous in front of them.

Do you actually *enjoy* singing more now than when you were a child?

If the answer is no, don't worry, you are not alone! Isn't it interesting that, for example, a thirty-year-old professional opera singer with a wonderfully high skill level might not actually *enjoy* making music any more than a three-year old child? In fact, in my experience of "professional" musicians, it's often quite the opposite. So what exactly is it that used to make singing so enjoyable for us as children? It certainly wasn't our fantastically "perfect" skill levels! In fact, we weren't in the least bit concerned with our skill levels! What was wonderful for us was the creative *process* of using our imagination to create music. The *process* was where all the fun was had, while the *result* of that process (the sound) was only of secondary importance. This is why a thirty-year old opera singer is no more *perfect* than a three-year-old singer!

Perfection in the child is the perfect joy of the process of making music. How the music actually sounds is not even an end in itself, although the sound and tone will improve as the child continues to *play at singing*. Learning is an *intrinsic human property*, and if we are interested enough in some activity to carry it out over a period of time, *learning will simply happen*. So learning is an *effect*, not a *cause*. And notice that any ideas about *having* to reach a certain standard or *having* to improve are simply not on a young child's radar. The improvements that come along as it continues to engage in the activity are fun and rewarding, but it is the creative imagination involved in making music, and the emotions that can be experienced within that process, that bring real *joy* to a child, that brought joy to *us* as children. *That* is perfection.

If your criteria for perfection reflect skill level, then you are not, and probably never will be, perfect.

If your criteria for perfection reflect imagination, creativity and emotion, then you are already perfect!

And this perfection often continues until the child receives its first experiences of *learning* from an adult's *results* based point of view. Indeed, many of us have been robbed of that wonderful source of fundamental joy and contentment, and now spend our time seeking fulfilment through the *approval* of others. But the approval of others really is a poor substitute for the true joy of our own creativity, and with the need for approval comes the fear that it may not be given.

Much of the sense of inadequacy, insecurity and self-doubt that we suffer stems from this. This is what makes us feel superior or inferior compared to others. This is what can lead to judgement, criticism, mocking and even bullying as we fight to be the most popular, the least weak, the most *accepted*, having lost touch with our own inner source of contentment.

"But I want to achieve things!!"

As children we "achieved" so many things that we lost count, the learning never stopped! But achievement for achievement's sake was not our aim. As we begin to see the virtuous circle of curiosity leading to joy leading to learning leading back to curiosity, we can begin to explore our own creativity, free to unlock our true potential, free from any harmful dependence on the approval of others and the insecurities that spring from that, free to express ourselves and to help others express themselves by being completely open to them without fear. Free to rediscover the perfection that has always been right there within us! And you will see ever more clearly that those who try to define you by their opinions only define themselves and their own misunderstandings.

And you *will* achieve things! Your wonderful, in-built *learning* nature will see to that! But you will not feel *defined* by your achievements, and they will no longer be your only source of joy!