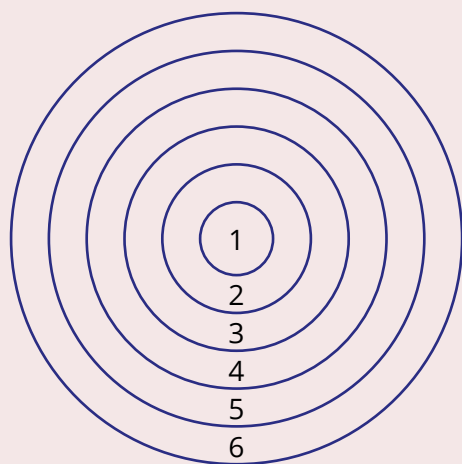


Training for Excellence

Factsheet: Focus of Attention

To perform well in sport, music or dance, an optimal focus of attention is crucial! This is illustrated by the **attention circles of Eberspächer** (see below).

Two functional attention systems can be identified: **goal-directed attention** (Circle 1) and **stimulus-driven attention** (Circles 2-6). The challenge is to stay focused on the task (Circle 1) and quickly regain this focus of attention if it is drawn away to any of the other circles.



Attention circles of Eberspächer

1. Focus on task (flow)
2. Direct distractions
3. How it should be
4. Performance (good/bad)
5. Consequences of performance
6. What am I doing here?

Internal vs External focus of attention

In Circle 1, two further types of goal-directed attention can be identified:

- 1. Internal focus of attention:** Attention primarily on motor control and technical execution (i.e., body parts and their movement). Expressive quality is secondary and the result of technical execution.
- 2. External focus of attention:** Attention primarily on the effects of playing on the environment, the intention of playing, and the intended effects (e.g., how it should sound, what one wishes to express, emotions). Expressive quality (e.g., emotion) is primary; technical execution follows from what one wishes to achieve.

Research has demonstrated clear **benefits** of the use of an **external** focus of attention:

- Perceived higher musical quality
- Equal technical precision
- Preferred by audience
- Perceived as more skilled
- Decreases performance anxiety

Learn to focus

Maintaining or regaining focus on the task can be learned, e.g., while playing under various circumstances during practice (see Planned disruptions, Factsheet Performing under pressure).

From time to time it might be useful to include variations in your body posture and movement (e.g., moving shoulders) or environment (e.g., practice in the dark).

By using these variations one learns to focus attention on the task under these varying conditions.

Focus of Attention in practice

Guidelines for Deliberate Practice

We encourage you to try out the following principles during your daily practice for at least a couple of weeks.

1. Focus on effect of playing

Focus on how the music sounds in the environment. Focus on the resonance of the notes, sharpness of the notes... Make it sound as good as possible in the room.

2. Focus on the message

Focus on the emotion, message or feeling you want to convey. Focus on bringing this message across in your music.

3. Focus on expression

Focus on giving an expressive performance for the audience. Focus on how the performance affects to the audience.

4. Use variations in body posture and movements

Practice a piece while executing other movements (e.g., moving shoulders, lying on the ground, standing on a wobble board).

5. Use variations in your environment

Bring variation in your practice environment (e.g., play in the dark, play facing a wall).

Tip #1

Try to become aware of your focus of attention during practice and performances. Where possible, make your focus external.

Tip #2

Self-regulate your use of focus of attention. Plan the methods presented here deliberately, make SMART goals and reflect on their usefulness for you.

Tip #3

Analogies or metaphors can also be used to define your external focus of attention (e.g., the music flows as a cold mountain stream).

Example exercises external focus

- How do the notes sound? Listen to the resonance of the room. Make the music sound as good as possible within the room.
- Project the music towards the audience. Focus on how it comes across for them. Make the performance as expressive as possible for the audience.
- Listen to the music in your mind. Imagine the perfect sound. Then, try to play it exactly as you heard
- Think about what the composer tried to convey with the music and focus on bringing that message across to the audience.
- Play around with emotions: overemphasize the emotion in the piece, play piece with opposite emotion (e.g., play sad piece cheerfully).
- Translate the music into colours or objects.
- Translate the music into images, analogies and metaphors (e.g., dark tense forest, little monkey jumping from tree to tree).

