

Ep #77: Pause Before Practicing

Can't
wait
to hear
you

with
Michèle Voillequé

Full Episode Transcript

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Your voice is unique to you. It grows as you grow. It changes as you change. If you're curious about the relationship between your voice and your body, your heart and your mind, welcome. My name is Michèle Voillequé and I can't wait to hear you.

In an ideal world, in an ideal moment, sitting down to practice feels like an opening.

It's a time when we are exquisitely loving and kind and curious about ourselves and whatever it is we're trying to get better at.

In an ideal world and an ideal moment.

I don't know about you, but I have glimpsed those ideals and I have made tremendous progress. And often when I go to practice, rather than open and curious, I am striving and grasping at a goal.

This thing needs to sound better by the time I'm done.

I need to know what these words are by the time I'm done.

I have 10 minutes. I have to figure out what that note is supposed to be.

or,

I have half an hour and I've gotta make every minute count because there's so much to do. There's so much on my list.

And, especially when it comes to singing, that grasping energy, that heavy, goal-directed feeling, more often than not puts extra tension in the body and makes it harder to remember and recall what it is that we're practicing.

I haven't seen any studies on this, so you're just gonna have to take my word for it, as somebody who's been at this a long time: whenever I have

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learned something under duress, or in a very tense situation, I do not remember it later. It's like cramming for an exam. It just goes in the very tippy top of my memory bank and it slides right back out as soon as it can.

But when I take the time to learn in a relaxed, open, generous, no hurry, curious, compassionate kind of place, I am able to retain so much more of what I was spending my time on.

I'm able to make such better progress. Durable progress. I don't just get it right once and then, “oh, good, I can check that off the list.”

I get it right, and then I can repeat it and repeat it, and I can notice more about it and reflect on it. And come up with images to help me find this again. And then when I come back to it, I find it more easily because it was learned in this place of ease and relaxation and not grasping.

It's human nature to be goal-oriented and goal-directed. Like, when we want something, we go get it. So this approach to learning music or learning a speech is kind of counterintuitive.

And it can feel scary. It can feel like, “well, where's the accountability then? If I am easy breezy and completely relaxed, I can't possibly be taking myself seriously.”

On the contrary, you're taking yourself the most seriously because you're allowing your entire self to be present, including the parts of you that are scared, that are bored, that are impatient, that are judgmental, all the parts.

When we can sit down with our whole selves to the task of learning something and acknowledge everyone's right to be there we make so much so much progress, so much faster.

And practicing becomes a thing that we want to come back to.

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It's true that the mind gets tired. The body gets tired. You can't practice forever, right? You have to stop, take a break, go do something else.

But we can end a practice session feeling happy with what we've accomplished, even if it wasn't everything we wanted to accomplish and looking forward to practicing again.

Rather than ending a practice session feeling completely defeated and angry and frustrated, and “I never wanna look at this again.”

Now that happens a lot. And I don't mean to say that that's wrong, just that there's a lot of drama in there. There's a lot of emotional energy in the frustration and the anger and *I'm never gonna get it* that really isn't, isn't necessary.

You don't need that to become great at whatever it is you're practicing.

You don't need that to become great in the eyes of others.

There is sort of a cliché that people who are particularly brilliant are jerks, and it's okay that they're jerks because they're brilliant.

No.

I don't think it's ever okay to be a jerk, even if you're brilliant. I think there's room for love, compassion, justice and brilliance, and that's the framework from which I approach practicing and warming up and, you know, trying to be the best person I can be in the world.

If I could make a suggestion for starting your practicing off on the right foot, it would be to first, pause and just notice yourself.

Notice whatever there is to notice about yourself. Notice, do you have a goal and what is it? You don't have to have a goal when you sit down to

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practice, but if you've got one, what is it?

How does your head and neck feel? How are your shoulders today? Can you feel your feet on the floor? Do a body scan, right? How are you in your body today?

How's your heart?

How are your emotions? Are you sad? Are you anxious? Are you happy?

Can you hear the birds outside?

Is there one beautiful thing in the room that you can take notice of?

When you can begin practicing first by pausing and noticing yourself, you'll work from a more grounded place.

This weekend I was able to hear the San Francisco Symphony play Mahler's Ninth Symphony, conducted by David Robertson. It was really lovely, and there's a moment at the end of classical music concerts where sometimes the applause starts too soon.

Like, the last note has barely finished and people are already furiously applauding. And it's great that they loved it so much, but I'm always grumpy about that because I want to hear that note ring in the hall. I want to hear the silence that comes after the final note.

And on Saturday night, Maestro Robertson did a beautiful thing. The symphony ends very quietly. It's as though after all of this complexity, it just gets simpler and simpler, and quieter and quieter, and he continued to conduct.

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But as the symphony came, as the piece came to its end, he raised his left hand far above his head, kind of like a big stop sign, and the music ended and he kept his left hand up. And only when he was ready, when the silence felt full enough, did he let his hand come down.

It was so beautiful.

It was so beautiful. I'm emotional thinking about it, remembering it.

That, silence that, but that it wasn't just silence, it was the fullness of the 90 minutes of music that had come before it.

And when I say “pause before you practice,” it's that kind of a pause I want you to find. Maybe not full of 90 minutes of Mahler, but a pause that feels like a thing.

It's not like you're just waiting for the clock to tick, but a pause that feels full of everything that you are and everything that you want to bring to this moment, this time of practicing that's before you.

Everything you want to give to yourself and give to the music or to the spoken word. Just the whole, the whole thing: you, the peace, the time, the space, all of it.

Let yourself feel all of it, and then begin.

That's what I've got for you today.

Thank you so much for listening.

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