### ARTICLE



# Understanding the Individual Practice Experiences of String Players in the Taranaki Symphony Orchestra: An Interpretive Phenomenological Study

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### Abstract

Within Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ), in general, and Taranaki, in particular, research on understanding experiences of individual practice for amateur adult string players has been limited. In 2021, with the aim of contributing to musical development in the Taranaki Symphony Orchestra (TSO), four adult string instrumentalists agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews, which were transcribed, coded, analysed and interpreted. Through the lens of interpretive phenomenology and a realist stance in music psychology, this article examines the emergence of complex, layered and dynamic experiences from players, including "Gestalt," "deliberate" and "additive" approaches to practising music (Tan et al., Tan, S.L., Pfordresher, P. & Harre, R. (2010). Psychology of Music: From Sound to Significance. (77,79, 179-197). Psychology Press. and "metacognitive strategies" (Concina, Concina, Frontiers in Psychology 10:1-17, 2019), "performance cues" (Ginsborg et al., Ginsborg, J., Chaffin, R., & Nicholson, G. (2006, August 22-26). Shared performance cues: Predictors of expert individual practice and ensemble rehearsal. [Conference session]. In 9th International conference on music perception and cognition, university of Bologna, Italy. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265508058), "mental models" (Keller, P.E. Annual New York Academy of Sciences 1252:206-213, 2012) and "mental imagery rehearsal" (Davidson-Kelly, K., Moran, N. & Overy, K. (2012, July 23-28). Learning and memorisation amongst advanced piano students: a questionnaire survey. [Conference session]. International Conference on Music Perception and the 8th Triennial Conference of the European Society for the Cognitive Sciences of Music, Thessaloniki, Greece. http://icmpc-escom2012.web.auth.gr/files/papers/248 Proc. pdf, Davidson-Kelly, K. (2014). Mental Imagery Rehearsal Strategies for Expert Pianists. [Doctor of Philosophy thesis, University of Edinburgh]. https://era.ed.ac. uk/handle/1842/14215) in music psychology. After receiving written feedback from stakeholders, recommendations include the implementation of individual practice forms (Hart, J.T. Music Educators Journal 101:57-64, 2014), and creating an online space for TSO players to exchange and reflect on individual practice experiences.

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

**Keywords** Taranaki Symphony Orchestra · Taranaki Youth Orchestra · Taranaki string instrument practice strategies · Taranaki string instrument practice experiences · Taranaki amateur adult string instrument practice experiences

## Introduction

The New Plymouth Orchestra was established in 1951 in response to a growing need within the community for broader, richer musical experiences. Now known as the Taranaki Symphony Orchestra (TSO), the Orchestra identifies itself as "an amateur community orchestra dedicated to achieving high standards of musicianship in a friendly atmosphere." (Taranaki Orchestra Home, 2023, 28 May). As a community orchestra, players are additionally involved in the challenge of raising funds (Taranaki Symphony Orchestra, 2023, 28 May) in line with Higgins' (2012) understanding of local musical organisations. This musical group is comprised of approximately 40 musicians and has continued to offer the public a variety of mostly European classical music concerts throughout the area for 71 years, frequently presenting professional soloists and major symphonic works.

With the founding of the Taranaki Youth Orchestra (TYO) in 1983, New Plymouth added another layer to the experience of community music (Taranaki Youth Orchestra Home, 2023, 28 May). More recently, in the midst of an ongoing global pandemic in December 2020, members of both the TYO and TSO demonstrated their commitment to this community by taking part in a "lockdown-performance," which included instrumentalists from both orchestras, in addition to eight choirs, in a video recording of Mountain Music by New Zealand composer David Hamilton. Moreover, with the support of Taranaki author, David Hill, local school children participated in creating the words/lyrics.

As a recent volunteer member of the TSO, I had never before seen such a degree of creativity and flexibility similar to what I was witnessing in this community orchestra. As the frequency and length of lockdowns increased, the TSO continued to adapt. Exactly how players managed their professional and personal time, whilst preparing for world premieres, holiday concerts and local chamber music events intrigued me. How much professional training did these musicians have? How did they organise and manage their individual practice time? What were their experiences of individual practice like, from their own perspective and in terms of music psychology? To answer these queries, I approached the three members of the TSO Committee through an email to the President in December 2020, suggesting a modest research project which would examine the understanding of individual practice experiences of four string players. After email discussions, all Committee members approved the project in writing and I began preparations in February 2021, despite being in Covid lockdown and unable to leave Rarotonga, the Cook Islands, for the next eighteen months.

This investigation focuses on a gap that was found in the literature which considers "the interaction between instrument, age, level of expertise and amount of practice," within the context of amateur adult string players who are members of the TSO (Jorgensen and Hallam, 2016). As a phenomenological study, the paper aims to "describe lived experiences" of individual practice sessions of the research participants (Polkinghorne, 1989). From a realist perspective, this writer further interprets these experiences within the framework of music psychology.

### **Literature Review**

In Aotearoa NZ, the syllabi provided by the NZ Music Examinations Board (2023) or NZMEB include a structured, graduated approach to learning scales, technical studies known as "etudes" and solo pieces. This understanding of musical formation should be familiar to three of the four TSO players, due to their own musical education in NZ primary and secondary schools.

Jorgensen and Hallam (2016) stress the "quantity" and "quality" of individual practice, including planning, establishing goals and assessment, similar to Tan et al.'s "deliberate practice model" (2010), which advocates a structured, graded framework. The formers' discussion on breaking a musical composition into isolated sections, according to difficulty, agrees with the additive approach found in Tan et al. Specifics on understanding musical practice from a Gestalt, holistic or top-down approach based on underlying musical patterns are found in the same work.

In line with Jorgensen and Hallam (2016), "metacognitive components" can be grouped as the: "selection of strategies, organising of practice time, and self-regulating," (Concina, 2019), relevant to all classical orchestral musicians, professional and amateur, within the framework of music psychology. Similarly, performance cues or the "formation of mental representations," (Ginsborg et al., 2006) are broadly applicable to the experience of individual practice and include "basic" cues: (counting, fingering, intonation), "interpretive" cues: (slurring, bowing, phrasing), "expressive" cues: (sound quality, colours, atmosphere) and "structural" cues: (where sections in the piece begin and end, how the work is organised).

Keller's (2012) work on mental models by musicians, in practice and in performance, clarifies that the concept of "internal models" is formulated by investigators in terms of "computational movement in neuroscience," making this an unlikely approach for amateur adult string players to apply to their own practice sessions. However, these "internal models" are used by researchers to better understand instrumental practice within the discipline of music psychology. For instance, the "forward model" begins with "motor commands" and is followed by desired movements or "sensory experiences," making this model the mainstay just before playing, e.g., checking the position of a string instrument, left hand, right hand and bow. Internally, the player "hears" an "ideal sound" which they attempt to reproduce. The "inverse model" starts with an observed adjustment to motor commands, such as hearing that one's tone quality is unfocused, issuing a motor command to move the bow more towards the bridge or fingerboard, again in an effort to reproduce an internal "ideal sound."

In terms of practising without the instrument, the work of Davidson-Kelly et al. (2012) has shown that a sample of thirty-seven piano students from various music colleges around the UK recognised the advantages of mental practice. Nonetheless, the usage of techniques for physically practising at the keyboard exceeded

employing techniques to be used away from the instrument. In their 2014 PhD thesis, Davidson-Kelly presents data from thirty-six pianists studying in the UK, highlighting that 81% of students had been "advised" to work with mental or "auditory imagery strategies," with 66% confirming that they had actually implemented these suggestions in their own practice.

To summarise, the above literature locates this paper within the contexts of the individual practice experiences of the TSO musicians and of music psychology.

### **Participants and Ethics**

In terms of phenomenology, TSO participants in this study are considered to be experts in their own experiences of individual practice (Reid et al., 2005), whilst Alase (2017) specifies that individuals taking part in a phenomenological study should number between "2 to 25." A total of four people volunteered, all of whom consented in writing to participate in online Zoom interviews and consisting of one from each string section in the Taranaki Symphony Orchestra: a violinist, a violist, a violoncellist and a double bass player. As a member of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018), this author followed the Association's ethical guidelines for the four TSO musicians, including anonymity for individuals by substituting names with the letters A, B, C and D. For security, recorded interviews and transcripts were restricted to storage on one device at all times.

The four TSO players averaged between 50 and 60 years of age. A, B and D are section leaders in the Orchestra, responsible for marking bowings in musical parts and encouraging collaboration amongst section players regarding technique and interpretation. TSO player A attended a conservatory in Europe, whilst B and C began musical studies as children in the NZ school system. Instrumentalist D initially trained at home, in addition to studying percussion and other stringed instruments. Furthermore, A, B and D also studied piano, whilst C trained in NZ with renowned Gestalt or holistic string teacher, K. Havas (2023), and D worked with recognised NZ professional string instructors H. Hopkins and E. Craig.

Currently, player B has retired (as a primary school music teacher, civil servant and piano teacher), D is a teacher of their principal instrument at home, C is a civil servant and A is an office worker. Due to lifestyle choices, A, B and D set aside their musical instruments for, respectively, 13, 32 and 10 years, returning later to their musical activities and the TSO. The average time for playing in the Orchestra is 27 years for each individual.

## Methods

### Semi-Structured Interviews

Overall, the research consisted of two phases: the interviews and the analyses. With the focus on lived experiences in instrumental practice, semi-structured interviews were selected as an effective way to encourage TSO players to "think, speak and be heard," consistent with interpretive phenomenological analysis. Moreover, such interviews encourage "flexible collaboration" between both interviewee and interviewer, promoting "better understanding and making sense of the topic," (Reid et al., 2005). Interview questions were based on the queries posited in the Introduction.

### Analyses

As recommended by Alase (2017) and Reid et al., "common themes" and "variations" were initially uncovered through frequent use of words or expressions within the context of each interview, e.g., the word "practice." Repetitions between the different statements made by interviewees were analysed, such as, "for next 20 years," "for many years," "early years," "at seven." Sometimes these words shared the common grammatical function of adverbs of frequency, such as "rarely," "generally," "normally," (Swan, 2016). In the following step, words, phrases and synonyms related directly to the research questions were searched for (e.g., "try to start," "draw from my practice,") and then organised into "segmented sentences" (Cresswell, 2014). The last step consisted of writing the "core" or "essence" of the "lived experiences" (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004) as cited in Alase (2017).

## Results

The following themes emerged from the recorded interviews, which were transcribed from Transcribe Wreally (2022), with supporting details from TechRadar, (2022). Coding samples are available on request from the author.

#### Individual Practice Experiences in General

A understands their experience of practice in terms of upcoming TSO concerts: "... it is most effective for me to practise things as close to the performance, or closer to the performance because then, then, then that work won't be wasted because I, you know, I will practise it. I'll practise it in the morning, I'll practise it again in the afternoon, and then we in the evening, we have the performance and I'm done. But if I practise it 3 weeks ago, then, you know, it wouldn't really be all that helpful."

Similarly, B explains that they practise more as a performance approaches: "It's about twice a week for the first few weeks and then the last month it increases, and then in the last week it would be every day."

In general, D points out that: "I'll just see as well what Adam's going to take us for, for that next rehearsal, because he puts it up on the website. So generally I will see what he's put up and that's what I'll focus on for that time."

From an analytical viewpoint, C clarifies: "So, in terms of the orchestral playing, it's very much thinking, okay, how am I going to play this? What, fingering need be, where are the intervals. So you're actually thinking about the mechanics of how you're going to play it in your head before you even play it." Stebbins' (1992) observations that amateur musicians are distinct from professionals due to their freedom of choice is appropriate, i.e., musicians play in an amateur orchestra by election rather than economic necessity. Considering these players' "systematic efforts" in their own individual practice, described above as arranged around the schedule and needs of the Orchestra, Stebbins' coinage of the phrase "serious leisure" sheds light on the understanding of TSO members' general practice experiences.

### **Recent Experiences of Practising**

A recalls that a recent experience of practising alone occurred:

"... last Saturday, when we had the rehearsal weekend." "Time" seems to be part of the experience of A's individual practice: "During that time, people took, the strings took their lunch break and Adam, the Music Director, practised with the brass. And during that time, I decided not to take a lunch break ...and I used those one and a half hours for my own practice." This practice experience during a break could be understood in terms of A's aforementioned role in the TSO as a section leader.

B stresses "time" with the adverb of frequency "often" (Swan, 2016):

"I often find these days, when trying to, I mean just to get into something specific, when trying to build a tricky phrase, I start, I start backwards." Using the phrase "when trying to" twice indicates, according to Swan, that B may understand this particular experience of practising alone as: "...doing something to see what will happen..." The repetition of "start" could highlight that this is B's initial phase of the experience of practice. B's reference to: "... trying to build a tricky phrase..." demonstrates the use of a "part vs whole approach" (Tan et al., 2010) from an "additive" viewpoint: initially isolating a segment, as previously mentioned, and then "building" it back into the larger body of the composition. As a TSO section leader and a piano teacher, B could suggest or demonstrate this particular approach to practicing alone with colleagues and piano students.

C refers to a context which does not include TSO orchestral parts, referring to "essentially solo melody" and "learning the pieces by heart":

"Well, yes, because it is essentially solo melody. I'm not playing any complimentary part, so I can actually focus on structured technique and learning the pieces by heart."

The prioritising of a "focus on structured technique" fits with a top-down understanding of the analysis of underlying patterns of notes, fingerings, etc. Due to their musical training, C refers to this approach when reflecting on their experience of practice in this case.

D demonstrates effective use of their available time by getting an overview of music with the help of YouTube:

"So I practised yesterday. And yesterday, I actually concentrated on the Faure and what I did was just to familiarise myself with timing and sound and stuff via YouTuber, what I did was just to familiarise myself with timing and sound and stuff ..."

Organising practice time aligns with D's musical training, employing the aforementioned structured or deliberate approach. Moreover, this could be due to their work as a teacher of their instrument at home and to their responsibilities as a section leader.

### **Past Practice Experiences**

A's response, in this case, refers to an earlier experience of individual practising, viewed from their perspective of previous musical education:

"...when I still had structured lessons, the last time I was at University, it, there were certain expectations that were checked. Oh, I knew that these were being checked. So my practice would follow this, the structure of the actual lesson. So we always start with C major scale, first very slow going over four octaves..." "So my practice would follow this."

This overview of A's past experiences in musical formation is an example of a warm-up, demonstrating a graded approach to working with levels which gradually become more challenging.

When B describes an instance of "feeling a bit daunted," observing:

"...Am I going to manage that?" they consider a specific, technical solution, indicating another instance of what was previously referred to as the additive approach:

"...there's a trill. The strings are heavy. Am I going to manage that? Maybe, maybe I'll just shorten it a bit...,"

In recounting an experience of previous practice outside of the TSO on a different string instrument, C describes a problem which is apparently rhythmic:

"It's typically in either six-eight or twelve-eight time, depending on who's actually scored it..." Unpacking the problem, C continues: "And because you're dealing with, it's a matter of getting the repeating pattern, with the left hand." Subsequently, as C reports: "... you need to divorce yourself from the instinctive bowing and actually get the accent on to the first of each set of triplets."

This overview of grasping a technical problem before playing illustrates C's holistic formation, as briefly discussed in a prior section.

D's reply concerns the most recent practice experience:

"...the day before I concentrated on the Mozart and I did the same thing and I had done that the previous practice with that one as well. I YouTubed each section and just went through with, with it on the YouTube just to get a feel of what's going down." Highlighting efficient use of their previous experience with YouTube and the Faure Requiem, D describes a combination of listening and playing along with a recording of the Mozart Requiem (in line with a gradual, structured approach mentioned above), initially going through sections to identify technically difficult passages. Repeating the strategy from the previous day with YouTube as a musical benchmark saves time and effort.

## Participants Imagined Experiences When Practising for a NZ Premiere

Although infrequent, the TSO occasionally has the opportunity to present premieres of local music. Two of the participants understand a hypothetical experience of practising which concurs with their musical education backgrounds:

Respectively, A and B's perception of hypothetical practice experiences is consistent with Tan's (2010) "deliberate practice model," based on their previous musical education and discussed above:

"So what you just described is basically my, my way of approaching any music that we play. I, if it has difficult passages that I need to practise at home, I will do that."

"So, it would simply be a case of to getting the nuts and bolts of the piece, right? You know, the timing, the time signature. Yeah. How long you hold notes for..."

A's mention of "difficult passages" and B's reference to "nuts and bolts" confirm a structured, graded, approach to practicing in a hypothetical situation.

At the same time, C and D make use of their different musical backgrounds to arrive at a similar solution—to study the music before playing it:

C: "...it comes down to being able to read the music, for a start..."

D: "...when I first get a piece of music, what I do is I will look at it, I'll just go through the pages. I won't play. I will look, I will just look at it." "I'm just visual on that. I'm not hearing anything."

# Participants' Awareness of Any Differences or Changes in Their Own Experiences of Individual Practising and Implications

All four TSO players manifest awareness of what and how their understandings of their experiences of individual practice have changed and will continue to change:

A initially describes the past structure of a deliberate approach to the practice experience, based on their early formation, stating that "regular lessons,...my practice would always start with scales and scales and then thirds and fifths..." The next phrase shows a change at this time: "But now...I go right into the meaty part where, where I need to go ..." Similar to B in the theme Past Practice Experiences, volunteer A shows awareness of selecting, isolating, analysing and reintegrating a difficult musical passage into the larger body of the work (as described before), in contrast with their early musical training.

B's awareness of differences or changes in understanding is presented as three points, reflecting in the first two that: "I've acquired more patience with the process..." "I've learned to play further up the strings..." B then concludes with an example of a specific future goal, affirming that: "What I most would like to do is improve my bow tone..." These comments suggest that, in general, B continues to experience their practice sessions within a framework that is graded according to

levels of musical and technical difficulty. Consequently, changes in individual practice occur as they move from one level to the next.

C displays a realisation of change in their understanding of the practice experience as being continuous, commenting that they are: "...also developing more insights into being experimental with technique, which is part of it. Trying new things..." From a holistic or top-down viewpoint, C again demonstrates an approach to the experience of practice similar to their musical formation.

Finally, D acknowledges changes or shifts regarding their own understanding of their experiences of individual practice: "Yeah I think I definitely approach practising, from a different angle, from a different perspective, from different sound." "Yeah, it's, I mean it's always got to be an evolving process..." Overall, this perspective agrees with that of player C, clarifying that their experience of individual practise is one that continues to develop over time.

In summary, within the scope of this paper, results indicate that players' selections from a range of approaches to practising alone shows an understanding of this experience as a dynamic, changing process, rather than a fixed approach to be implemented at all times.

## Discussion

As previously indicated, to describe TSO players' lived experiences of practicing alone, this writer coded and analysed interview transcripts, uncovering "commonalities" and "variations" (Reid et al., 2005) within the frameworks of interpretive phenomenology and of music psychology for a more realist view (Jeong & Othman, 2016), as presented below:

#### Commonalities

- From both a holistic and a structured approach to practice, individual practice experiences are impacted by available time within the four TSO players' personal and professional obligations, as amateur adult string players voluntarily engaged in "serious leisure" (Stebbins, 1992). Based on these interviews, players generally approach their practice experiences according to TSO priorities and individual schedules, with the following section demonstrating another practice strategy that saves time.
- 2. Irrespective of early musical education, all four musicians selectively employ the additive practice approach described by Tan et al. (2010) maximising limited time by isolating technically difficult passages for the left or right hand or a combination of both. From the stance of music psychology, this further indicates players' employment, although likely unaware, of the metacognitive strategies of planning and prioritising (Concina, 2019), by firstly identifying the interpretive performance cues of dynamics and tempo/speed (Ginsborg et al., 2006).

## Variations

- 1. According to their early musical training, when imagining the study of a new piece of music, before physically playing the composition—C from a top-down approach and D from a graduated practice approach—the two instrumentalists implement what is known in music psychology as "mental imagery rehearsal" (Davidson Kelly, 2014). This suggests that a holistic view to approaching a hypothetical practice situation by both C and D concurs with C's training from a top-down view. D's musical formation, despite being within a structured framework, would have been influenced by the latter's additional study of a number of other musical instruments, which encouraged a top-down perspective on the study of music.
- 2. Whilst practising alone with an additive approach, C implements internal models from music psychology (Keller, 2012) to solve technical problems between the left and right hands. This indicates that C's approach to the experience of practise tends to support usage of both mental models and mental imagery rehearsal within the context of music psychology, a perspective with which participants are probably unfamiliar.

# Conclusions

Written feedback on the completed paper was received from the four TSO string players and members of the Taranaki Symphony Orchestra Committee and then incorporated into a suggested form for practice planning based on Hart (2014), which includes optional strategies for practising from the players' interviews, making this paper relevant to the individual practice experiences of other TSO players, as seen below:

## Sample Weekly Practice Schedule:

Realistically, I aim to practise individually this week for roughly: \_\_\_\_\_\_. **Optional Warm Up:** 5–10 min (such as slow scales): \_\_\_\_\_\_.

**Based on Metacognitive Strategies from Music Psychology ("evaluating the musical material, self-evaluation, planning and management of practice" in** Concina (2019) **and performance cues in** Ginsborg et al. (2006): Before practising, what is my main goal today?

Look at bowing, dynamics and rhythm in the De Falla from bar 120 to bar 137

(15 minutes)

# Exactly What Will I Do to Achieve Each Goal? Suggestions

Try the semiquaver bowing in De Falla, with a piano dynamic, starting from the wrist for violin and viola, from the right elbow with a relaxed wrist for cello.

For double bass, start from the shoulder, keeping forearm and wrist loose, whilst listening to avoid a scratchy or unfocused sound on all instruments. Next, play the passage slowly, gradually increasing the speed and finally playing along with a YouTube recording.

## The Sharing of Individual Practice Experiences

In addition to the details available online for TSO members at https://sites.google.com/ site/taranakisorchestra/info-for-players?authuser=0 (2023), players could share their own experiences of individual practice for current TSO repertoire, as well as any comments on posted performance samples and alternative ideas. Along with the aforementioned practice form, these online exchanges could prove useful for further research into the individual practice experiences of other TSO musicians, with appropriate consent and guidelines for autonomy.

### **Limitations and Trustworthiness**

This research is limited to the understanding of individual practice experiences of the four amateur adult string players from the TSO who agreed to be interviewed and is meant to be shared with other TSO players to potentially enhance their own experiences of private practice. Trustworthiness has been established through member checking by the TSO volunteers, as well as the three members of the TSO Orchestra Committee.

### Declarations

**Conflict of interest** I, Ernst Peter Frey, hereby affirm that this paper has not been published elsewhere nor is the manuscript under consideration with any other publisher (29 May, 2023).

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