

**HOW MEDITATIVE BREATHING CAN ENHANCE MUSICAL PERFORMANCE:
A STUDY ON THE PRACTICAL USE OF ALTERNATE NOSTRIL
BREATHING AND DEEP BREATHING**

A PROJECT REPORT

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ABSTRACT

**HOW MEDITATIVE BREATHING CAN ENHANCE MUSICAL PERFORMANCE:
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BREATHING AND DEEP BREATHING**

By

Rachel Trumbore

May 2018

This paper will help musicians understand the positive effects of incorporating deep breathing and alternate nostril breathing meditation techniques into their daily practice sessions by corroborating how these techniques enhance both mental focus and physical calm. I will give examples of how I use these techniques in warm-ups, practice sessions, and in the performance of *Sonatine pour Trombone et Piano* by Jacques Castérède. Additionally, I will provide a brief introductory background to meditation as well as scientific evidence to validate its many benefits for musicians. The ultimate goal of this paper is to equip musicians with specific meditative breathing techniques that when used during daily practice sessions, enhance focus in a way that can be applied to performance situations leading to more intentional performances.

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INTRODUCTION

Many musicians struggle with performance anxiety, letting it take over their thought processes and inhibiting their performances. Musicians experiencing symptoms of performance anxiety are not able to stay in an open state of mind that is ideal for creating genuine musical expression. This lack of focus stems from the brain's response to a perceived fear of performing that, without the use of techniques to overcome it causes the primal reaction of either fighting or fleeing to override highly evolved artistic aims. If musicians are able to find ways around the blockages that are caused by performance anxiety, they will be better able to create their desired musical outcome. Meditation can be utilized as a tool to help musicians stay focused even while experiencing performance anxiety. Meditation can be defined as the art of cultivating a deep awareness of the present moment. Presence increases sensitivity to mental and sensory perceptions. Through this increased awareness, one is able to choose the way they experience and interpret the world around them. Deep breathing and alternate nostril breathing are two forms of meditation that, if practiced regularly, can be valuable tools to use in the face of performance anxiety, freeing musicians to give an intentional performance. Meditative breathing improves mental focus and calms the nervous system, thus musicians who integrate breathing techniques into their practice sessions will be more successful in performance situations than those who use no techniques to calm the mind.

I have personally experienced intensified focus and improved physical calmness in my performances through developing a meditative breathing practice. This paper will help musicians understand the positive effects of incorporating two breathing meditation techniques into their daily practice sessions by corroborating how these techniques enhance both mental focus and physical calm. I will give a walk-through of how I use meditative breathing in my own practice

sessions in relation to my warm-up, and performances in relation to the *Sonatine pour Trombone et Piano* by Jacques Castérède. Additionally, I will provide a brief, introductory background to meditation as well as scientific evidence to validate its many benefits for musicians. The ultimate goal of this paper is to equip musicians with specific meditative breathing techniques, that when used during daily warm-ups and practice sessions, enhance focus in a way that can be applied to performance situations, leading to more intentional performances.

CHAPTER 1

MEDITATION BACKGROUND

Meditation is an ancient practice of uniting mind, body, and spirit through the cultivation of awareness. Through meditation, one can see through the chatter of the thinking mind and notice that their inner essence is awareness itself. While further study on the history of meditation is highly encouraged for all who practice it, it will be briefly summarized here for the purposes of addressing the topic of this paper. The earliest known documentation on the cultivated practice of meditation comes to us from the yogic tradition that is described in the Vedic texts of ancient India (1500 BCE). This tradition has developed many lineages over the centuries, but this paper will focus on two techniques from the *Pranayama* and *Vipassana* schools respectively.

The *Pranayama* school focuses on the regulation of the breath through specific exercises and techniques. *Pranayama* comes from two Sanskrit words that can be translated as *prana*, “breath” or “life-force” and *ayama*, “to extend or draw out.”¹ This tradition contains many breathing techniques that help to center the yogi physically, mentally, and spiritually. One such technique, *Nadi Shodhana*, which helps to synchronize the body and mind, will be discussed in the following chapters.

The practice of mindfulness meditation in western culture comes primarily from the Buddhist tradition of *Vipassana* or “insight” meditation.² The principles gained from mindfulness meditation can be applied to any daily activity in order to bring about a greater connection to everyday life. This paper will also focus on the technique of *Anapanasati*, or

¹ YJ Editors, “Beginner’s Guide to Pranayama,” *Yoga Journal* (blog), October 10, 2014,

² Giovanni Dienstmann, “Meditation- An Overview of 23 Meditation Techniques,” *Live and Dare* (blog), accessed October 25, 2017, <https://www.liveanddare.com/types-of-meditation>.

“mindfulness of breathing,” in relation to deep breathing to see how it can be used in combination with *Nadi Shodhana* to calm the body and refocus the mind in the practicing and performing of music.

CHAPTER 2

BREATHING MEDITATION BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH

In performance, most musicians experience some degree of nervousness. Knowing how their nerves affect their body and mind, an informed musician can go into a meditative state before performing to reduce their symptoms of performance anxiety. Meditation increases awareness of the present moment. Furthermore, its beneficial effects can be noticed over brief time spans when the meditation is focused on the breath. New practitioners of meditation often find it difficult to let go of their thinking mind, but by paying full attention to the breath, there is very little room for extraneous thoughts to arise. Breathing can only happen in the moment, which is why it is such a useful tool for bringing awareness to the present, so that even people who struggle with dissociating from their minds in meditation can release their thoughts with greater ease. Being able to change how and where the focus is centered quickly is especially pertinent for a musician who is experiencing performance anxiety.

Breathing deeply and slowly is one of the fastest ways to calm the nervous system and clear the mind, making it an ideal prescription to effectively manage symptoms of performance anxiety and free the musician to concentrate fully on the performance. The state of mind after a brief meditation is more at ease, more open, and more focused than before meditation (see Figure 1). Essentially, what has happened in the mind is a change in priority from being absorbed in the past or future, to fully experiencing the present moment.

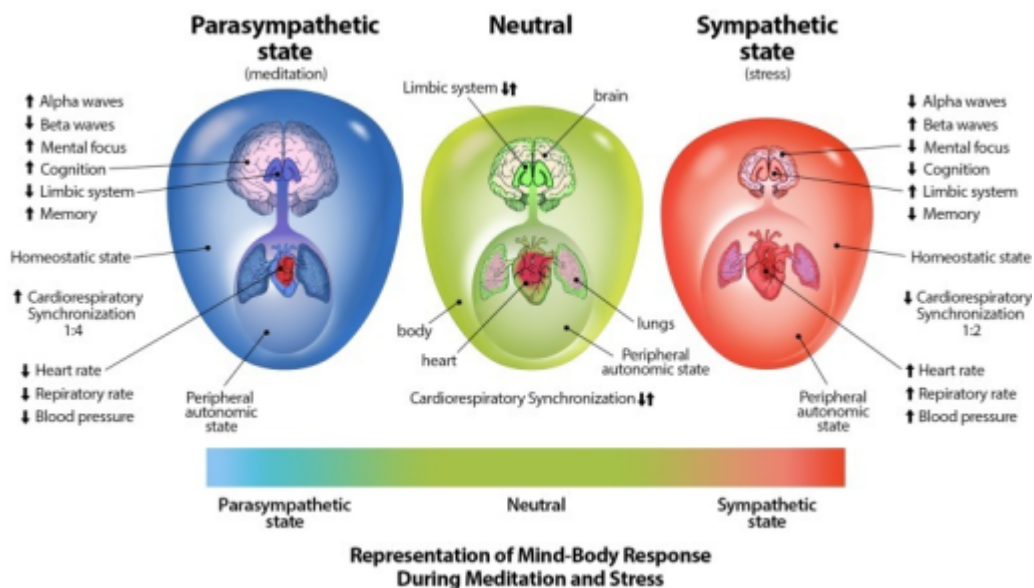


FIGURE 1. Representation of mind-body response during meditation and stress.³

Nadi Shodhana (Alternate Nostril Breathing)

The *Nadi Shodhana* (alternate nostril) breathing technique involves the covering of one nostril with the thumb during a slow and measured inhalation, and switching to cover the opposite nostril with the ring and pinky fingers for an equal length and depth of exhalation. The next inhale comes into the same nostril that just exhaled, then the fingers switch so that the exhale comes out of the opposite nostril. This process is repeated 5-10 times, with the awareness centered on the breath and the sensation of it coming and leaving from each nostril (see Figures 2 and 3 for more detailed description on practice). The benefits of alternate nostril breathing include clarity of thought, increased vitality and lower levels of stress.⁴ Medical studies have shown that it also helps to reset the nervous system by significantly decreasing systolic blood

³ Ravinder Jerath, Molly W. Crawford, and Vernon A. Barnes, “A Unified 3D Default Space Consciousness Model Combining Neurological and Physiological Processes That Underlie Conscious Experience,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 6 (2015): 1204, accessed November 7, 2017, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4550793/>.

⁴ Gentle Marvin, “July Pose of the Month: Alternate Nostril Breathing,” *Brooklyn Yoga School Blog*, July 1, 2013, accessed October 20, 2017, <https://brooklynogaschool.com/blog/2014/4/5/pose-of-the-month-july-2013-alternate-nostril-breathing>.

pressure and respiration rate.⁵ By breathing through one nostril at a time, the left and right hemispheres of the brain are naturally balanced, creating a desirable mental state for a practice session.⁶ This brief meditation cycle can be done for 2-5 minutes before beginning to practice, as well as during the session to quickly realign mental balance if focus is lost or if tension is noticed in the sound or body.



FIGURE 2. Illustration of *Nadi Shodhana*.⁷

⁵ Shirley Telles, Sachin Kumar Sharma, and Acharya Balkrishna, “Blood Pressure and Heart Rate Variability During Yoga-Based Alternate Nostril Breathing Practice and Breath Awareness,” *Medical Science: Monitor Basic Research* 20, (2014): 184-193, accessed October 19, 2017, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4247229/>.

⁶ The Art of Living, “Alternate Nostril Breathing Technique (Nadi Shodhan Pranayama),” *Art of Living* (blog), accessed November 3, 2017, <https://www.artofliving.org/us-en/yoga/breathing-techniques/alternate-nostril-breathing-nadi-shodhan>.

⁷ Ibid.

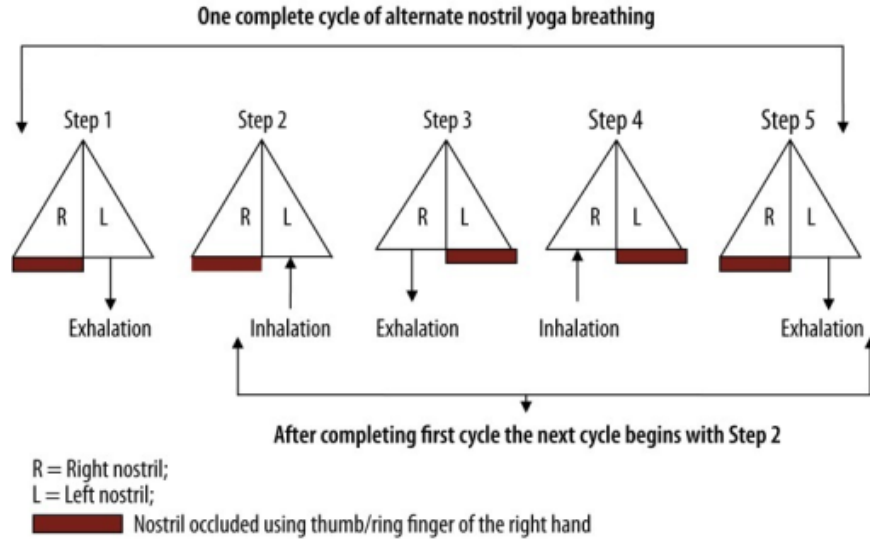


FIGURE 3. One complete cycle of *Nadi Shodhana*.⁸

***Anapanasati* (Mindful Deep Breathing)**

Anapanasati or mindful, deep breathing meditation is a simple practice that centers mental and physical attention on the sensation of taking slow, full breaths. The scientific effect of deep breathing on the body has been studied with remarkable results. Similar to the alternate nostril breathing, deep breathing has been shown to lower respiration rate, heart rate, and blood pressure, as well as increase theta wave amplitude and parasympathetic activity, which creates the feeling of alertness and reinvigoration.⁹ Although vocalists and wind instrumentalists think about and engage in deep breathing far more than non-wind instrumentalists, all instrumentalists can benefit from incorporating mindfulness of breath into their in daily practice.¹⁰

⁸ Shirley Telles, Sachin Kumar Sharma, and Acharya Balkrishna, “Blood Pressure and Heart Rate Variability During Yoga-Based Alternate Nostril Breathing Practice and Breath Awareness.”

⁹ Ravinder Jerath, John W. Edry, Vernon A. Barnes, and Vandna Jerath, “Physiology of Long Pranayamic Breathing: Neural Respiratory Elements May Provide a Mechanism That Explains How Slow Deep Breathing Shifts the Autonomic Nervous System,” *Medical Hypotheses* 67, no. 3 (2006): 566-571, accessed November 7, 2017, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0306987706001666?via%3Dihub>.

CHAPTER 3

INCORPORATING MEDITATIVE BREATHING TECHNIQUES WHILE PRACTICING

It is important for musicians to be in an open and creative mindset during their practice sessions so that the hard work they are doing brings them joy. Practice is more productive when approached with an attitude of play and constant experimentation rather than stress and irritation at the slightest mistake. As we often learn more from our mistakes than our successes, recognizing failure as a necessary step for further improvement does away with the unrealistic and unhealthy need for flawless execution. Musicians who are unable to accept their failures fall into the dangerous trap of practicing out of the fear of making mistakes. This perfectionist mentality, if habituated in daily practice, leads to an increase in symptoms of performance anxiety because the desired performance outcome is not attainable. This is why establishing a desirable mindset for a performance far before the actual event happens is vital to reducing and eliminating future performance anxiety. If the act of playing the instrument is enjoyable on a daily basis, it is more likely to continue being enjoyable in a performance situation. Musicians who do not actively cultivate the habit of having positive interactions with their instruments are far more susceptible to fall victim to performance anxiety when playing in front of an audience.

Setting Up the Practice Space

It is wise to approach practice sessions with the same standards employed while performing since the habits that are formed and repeated in daily practice are the habits that will be present on stage during a performance. Alternate nostril breathing and deep breathing can be

¹⁰ The Art of Living, “Pranayama: The Beginner’s Guide to Yoga Breathing Exercises,” *Art of Living* (blog), accessed November 3, 2017, <https://www.artofliving.org/us-en/yoga/breathing-techniques/yoga-and-pranayama>.

highly beneficial in mentally and physically preparing the musician to have a productive practice session.

Personal Example of Practice Space Set-Up

I set up my desired mental and physical practice space by performing 7-10 rounds of an alternate nostril breathing meditation before I play a note on my trombone. As I go through the cycles of inhalation and exhalation, I let go of the thoughts that arise in my mind, allowing my focus to center on each breath in its entirety. In becoming more aware of how my breathing sounds and feels, I am physically preparing my lungs to continue to take in full, relaxed breaths as well as preparing my ears to stay intensely engaged with my sound as I begin to play.

I have found that attentiveness to sound and breathing provide for extremely efficient and effective practice sessions. On top of maintaining acute aural awareness, I want to feel open and relaxed in my body in order to reach maximum breath capacity and maximum resonance inside my lungs. Meditating with alternate nostril breathing helps me enter into my desired mentality for practice.

Example of My Warm-Up

The goal of my warm-up is to slowly reacquaint myself with the instrument each day by reintroducing and re-solidifying one foundational element at a time. I stay in a meditative state by focusing on the sound and feeling of my inhalation and exhalation, changing from a silent breathing meditation to a sound-based breathing meditation. I find that starting from a place of simplicity encourages continued effortlessness throughout the practice session.

I start by playing long tones to ensure that my ears are listening for a resonant sound and that my air is flowing freely. I begin in a comfortable register where establishing my ideal tone is

easy, then sustain that same quality up and down to both extreme registers. As I play, I listen for a consistent sound by being aware of each note as it happens.

I absorbed this practice from my mentor and teacher Michael Mulcahy who has a mantra that he makes all of his students memorize and chant that goes, “your job is to create the most beautiful sound on every note, one note at a time, as easily as possible.”¹¹ This simple result is only possible if the musician is listening for what is happening in the present moment. It is easy to lose focus and mentally jump on to the next note before the previous one is finished, but as soon as present awareness skips ahead to the future, the current note is no longer intentional and unconscious mistakes are more likely to be made. I devote my warm-up to setting up aural presence to truly hear how each note sounds, and use slow, deep breathing between exercises to keep me in a calm and focused state. Since adding a meditation routine into my warm-ups, I have noticed a greater consistency of concentrated aural awareness throughout my practice sessions, even when learning difficult repertoire such as the *Sonatine pour Trombone et Piano* by Jacques Castérède.

Practicing Repertoire

After my warm-up, I continue to apply meditative breathing techniques while I work on repertoire. For example, *Sonatine pour Trombone et Piano* by Jacques Castérède, is markedly difficult because there are many sections in a fast tempo which include long, legato phrases requiring full and quick breaths (see Figure 4). It is easy to become physically tense when taking short breaths over long periods of time. The key is figuring out how to remain calm while playing these challenging sections. Breathing in the same style as the music is the only way to keep the breaths from becoming closed off and detracting from the musical line. I have spent

¹¹ Michael Mulcahy, studio class talk, September 2012.

quite a bit of time listening to my breathing during my meditations, and have so come to listen for it while I play music as well. I have found that by listening for my breath as much as I listen for the notes, I am more intentional in my phrasing and better able to sustain the sound through the longer phrases. When I do finally have a few measures to rest, I use this time to breathe deeply and slowly engaging in *Anapanasati*, re-centering my focus on my breath and relaxing my body for the next entrance. This has been a very effective tool to use in the heat of the battle to release the tension that builds up in my body when I play intense passages. Ideally, I would not be so tense at ends of phrases; however, this is my current best solution for an overarching issue that I still need to resolve.



FIGURE 4. Jacques Castérède, *Sonatine pour Trombone et Piano*, movement 3, mm. 42-65.¹²

Personal Benefit from Incorporating Breathing Meditation into Daily Practice

This quote from *Effortless Mastery* by Kenny Werner sums up my previous performance mentality, “Fear of not becoming great has kept you from becoming great. To find a way out of

¹² Jacques Castérède, *Sonatine pour Trombone et Piano* Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1958.

this dilemma, a thorough re-programming of your mind is necessary.”¹³ Before changing my mindset, I would frequently get frustrated in practice sessions because my goal was perfect playing. This destructive approach obviously caused me to develop an unhealthy performance mentality, where I was so worried about making mistakes that I would physically shake while playing. I knew that I needed to find a way to get over this if I ever wanted to play professionally. Meditation was the catalyst that started my journey of discovering what a healthy performance mentality means to me.

Through my breathing meditation practice, I have learned to quiet and transmute my negative thoughts and maintain physical calmness. This has brought about a significant change in my approach to playing and practicing. I am more stable and less reactive while I play now, while also keeping my focus on musical intent. It is still a work in progress, but I am presently in a far better place than I was before. By increasing my attention to each note as it happens, my playing has also become more consistent and more refined. Practice is more fun and enjoyable, and therefore more efficient, because I changed my attitude from trying to play perfectly to playing with densely focused expressive intent. This has helped me make my practice sessions more about problem-solving in terms of creating my best art instead of a perfect product. Not only have I noticed a positive difference in my practice sessions from my meditation training, but my performances are significantly more confident.

¹³ Kenny Werner, *Effortless Mastery: Liberating the Master Musician Within* (New Albany, IN: Jamey Aebersold Jazz, 1996), 63.

CHAPTER 4

INCORPORATING MEDITATIVE BREATHING TECHNIQUES WHILE

PERFORMING

Performances reveal a musician's true level of preparation. If any element of the performance has been overlooked or learned poorly, it becomes strikingly apparent when the musician is put in front of an audience. It is natural to feel anxious, excited, and even nervous for a performance due to the release of adrenaline that comes before walking on stage. This hormone is the body's way of preparing for performances and is meant to heighten the senses, thus heightening the performer's effectiveness on stage.¹⁴ It is when the mind misinterprets and becomes distracted by this sensation that performance anxiety comes into play. This fine line is the difference between performance enhancement and debilitation, that is to say, whether the mind interprets the body's physical response to the situation as positive or negative.

If the surge of adrenaline in the body is not perceived as positive, it will likely activate the fight-or-flight response, which is what typically manifests as performance anxiety.¹⁵ Because the body perceives the performance situation as a threat to its survival, the musician's heart rate will increase and breathing will become more rapid and shallow.¹⁶ This is why slow, deep breathing is so vital; it counters all of these symptoms by activating the parasympathetic nervous

¹⁴ Jeanine Detz, "How to Make Your Anxiety Work For You (Instead of Against You)," *Self* (blog), July 11, 2016, accessed February 25, 2018, <https://www.self.com/story/how-to-make-your-anxiety-work-for-you-instead-of-against-you>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

system response.¹⁷ Furthermore, deep breathing paired with meditation not only calms the body, but also helps the mind see through the feelings of anxiety and stay focused on the expression of the music. This method will still work to an extent if used only when performance anxiety is experienced, but if it has been practiced along with the music as preparation for the performance, it will be a familiar state to return to, freeing the musician to give their best performance.¹⁸

Example of My Approach the Day of a Performance

In the hours leading up to a performance, I do my best to stay in the present moment with the goal of keeping my body and mind as calm as possible. I know that I have put in the preparation necessary to share a meaningful musical performance with my audience. I arrive at the hall about an hour before the performance to give myself time to mentally and physically prepare in the space I will be playing in. I go over a few pre-planned passages on stage, listening to how my sound is ringing in the hall. I usually play for ten minutes or less, just enough to hear how the hall responds to my sound. Then I go backstage and enter into meditation with alternate nostril breathing for five minutes. I find this technique helpful for balancing my brain hemispheres to quiet my inner critic, and to allow creativity and passion to flow freely from me. Once I feel mentally balanced, I stay in meditation and switch to slow, deep breathing to maintain my physical calm. In this state, I think positive affirmations to myself, such as “I feel at peace with my level of preparation,” or “I am ready to share my musical message with love.” Thinking loving thoughts acts as a shield against negativity and keeps me from letting

¹⁷ Noa Kageyama, “How to Make Performance Anxiety into an Asset Instead of a Liability,” *The Bulletproof Musician (Blog)*, accessed October 20, 2017, <https://bulletproofmusician.com/how-to-make-performance-anxiety-an-asset-instead-of-a-liability/>.

¹⁸ Lesley Alderman, “Breathe. Exhale. Repeat: The Benefits of Controlled Breathing,” *New York Times*, November 9, 2016, accessed February 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/09/well/mind/breathe-exhale-repeat-the-benefits-of-controlled-breathing.html>.

performance anxiety symptoms take over my mentality. Right before I walk out on stage, I take a few more deep breaths and trust that I will play to my high level of preparation.

Using Breathing Meditation During a Performance

“There is a profound mind-body connection that happens during peak performance in which your mind is clear and focused and your body reacts to its every intent. When you feel positive, optimistic, and confident, you lay the foundation that enables you to reach this potential. The result is often the appearance of complete effortlessness.”¹⁹ McAllister aptly explains the ideal state for performance, which can be equated with a sound-based meditation. If preparation for the performance includes, for example, deep breathing and alternate nostril breathing meditations, they become an inherent part of the performance in the same manner as the music itself. This mentality manifests as a higher level of physical calm, and a higher level of focus that comes with the ability to let go of and recover from mistakes quickly.

Example of My Approach During a Performance

I have found that I can get into the flow of my performances more quickly and easily when I have incorporated breathing meditations into my daily practicing. My best performances have been when I am intensely focused on the intended expression and I truly enjoy sharing it with the audience. Furthermore, in this mentality, imperfections that once would have bothered me no longer interfere with my focus. This is my ultimate goal as a musician: to be able to sing freely from my heart, unhindered by performance anxiety or negative thoughts, in order to share the gift of music that has given so much to me.

¹⁹ Lesley Sisterhen McAllister, *The Balanced Musician: Integrating Mind and Body for Peak Performance* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2013), 30.

CONCLUSION

In *The Balanced Musician*, Lesley Sisterhen McAllister brings attention to the mental aspect of music performance, which she claims has been too long neglected and undervalued. McAllister states that musicians have much to gain from implementing mental techniques in addition to their physical practice. Furthermore, she refers to performance enhancement as, “building the skills that strengthen your level of performance to an optimal degree.”²⁰ Her argument is that if more musicians utilized meditation and other mental performance enhancing techniques alongside their physical practicing, performance anxiety would not be such an issue. This paper has been an effort to support this argument as well as supply two specific techniques that can be used in daily practice to enhance musical performance. Both alternate nostril breathing and deep breathing can be practiced in a way that can be easily applied to performance situations, leading to more intentional music making.

²⁰ McAllister, *The Balanced Musician*, 28.

APPENDIX

PROGRAM

APPENDIX

PROGRAM

Sonatine pour Trombone et Piano

I. *Allegro vivo*

II. *Andante sostenuto*

III. *Allegro*

Jacques Castérède

(1926-2014)

Flute Sonata in Eb Major, BWV 1031

I. *Allegro moderato*

II. *Siciliana*

III. *Allegro*

J. S. Bach

(1685-1750)

Sarah Campbell- flute

Three Medieval Dances

I. *Danse la Cleve*

II. *Amoroso*

III. *La Spagna*

Anonymous

ed. Christian Lindberg

INTERMISSION

Concert Piece No. 5

Vladislav Blazhevich

(1881-1942)

Réverie

Claude Debussy

(1862-1918)

arr. F. Ronchini

Trombone Concertino

I. *Allegro maestoso*

II. *Andante marcia funebre*

III. *Allegro maestoso*

Ferdinand David

(1810-1873)

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