



Exploring five professional violinists' flow experiences during solo and chamber music performances: An interpretative phenomenological analysis

D'Alebout C

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Promoter: Prof L van der Merwe

Practical promoter: Prof P Koornhof

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DECLARATION

DEDICATION

Opgedra aan my ouers, Kallie en Carlien D'Alebout.

Dankie dat Mamma en Pappa vir my die wêreldse geleenthede gegee het. Van daardie heel eerste vioolles in 2003, elke week 260 km Johannesburg toe en terug ry net om my les toe te vat, jare se bekommernis en grys hare van 'n kind wat oorsee is, tot die voorreg om hierdie graad te voltooi.

Alles wat ek is, is te danke aan Mamma en Pappa.

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- The participants of this study. Thank you for giving me some of your valuable time and trusting me enough to share your personal flow stories. I appreciate your participation very much, and I have learned valuable lessons from each one of you;
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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

This Doctor of Music Performance study is made up of two phases. Phase one consists of two examination concerts of 60 minutes each, where technical and musical abilities were evaluated. Phase two consists of an artistic research process, which may be structured in one of four ways. For my study I chose option B which consists of a formal assignment, which is shorter than a thesis, and two additional concert programmes of 60 minutes each, forming an integrated whole with my formal assignment. The two phases together constitute 360 credits. Prof. Liesl van der Merwe served as promoter for the research process, and Prof. Piet Koornhof as promoter for the practical examinations and concerts.

PROGRAMME 1 (EXAMINATION)

2 July 2023, 11h30

Violin and piano, with Annalien Ball

NWU Conservatory Hall

1. C. Debussy (1862 - 1918)

Sonata in G minor for violin and piano, L.140

- i. Allegro vivo
- ii. Intermède: Fantasque et léger
- iii. Finale Très animé

2. M. Ravel (1875 – 1937)

Sonata No. 2 for violin and piano

- i. Allegretto
- ii. Blues. Moderato
- iii. Perpetuum mobile

PROGRAMME 2 (EXAMINATION)

17 February 2024, 11h30

Violin and piano, with Annalien Ball

NWU Conservatory Hall

1. L. van Beethoven (1770 – 1827)

Romance No. 1 in G Major, Op. 40

2. L. van Beethoven (1770 – 1827)

Violin concerto in D Major, Op. 61

- i. Allegro ma non troppo
- ii. Larghetto
- iii. Rondo. Allegro

PROGRAMME 3 (INTEGRATED WHOLE CONCERT)

18 May 2024, 19h00

Violin and piano, with Annalien Ball
Afrikaanse Hoër Seunskool Ouditorium

1. L. van Beethoven (1770 – 1827)

Violin sonata No. 5 in F major, Op. 24

- i. Allegro
- ii. Adagio molto espressivo
- iii. Scherzo: Allegro molto
- iv. Rondo: Allegro ma non troppo

2. F. Kreisler (1875 – 1962)

Danse Orientale

3. C. Franck (1822 – 1890)

Sonata in A major

- i. Allegretto ben moderato
- ii. Allegro molto
- iii. Recitativo-Fantasia: Ben moderato
- iv. Allegretto poco mosso

PROGRAMME 4 (INTEGRATED WHOLE CONCERT)

19 May 2024 11h00

Violin and piano, with Leandra Mans
Afrikaanse Hoër Seunskool Ouditorium

1. A. Pärt (1953-)

Fratres

2. B. Dvarionas (1904 – 1972)

Pezzo elegiaco

Scherzino

Elegia canzonetta

Adagio

Meditation

Impromptu

3. F. Mendelssohn (1809 – 1847)
Violin concerto in E minor, Op. 64
ii. Andante
4. J. Brahms (1833 – 1897)
Violin concerto in D major, Op. 77
ii. Adagio
5. J. Sibelius (1865 – 1957)
Violin concerto in D minor, Op. 47
ii. Adagio di molto

ABSTRACT

This interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study explores how five professional violinists, who teach and perform in South Africa, make sense of their lived flow experiences during solo and chamber music performances. I am interested in understanding how the participants make sense of their flow experiences and to what extent Csikszentmihalyi, (2014:133) nine conditions for flow explain the inhibiting and promoting conditions of flow for the participants.

By making use of an IPA approach, I can give extensive attention to each individual to deeply and thoroughly understand their sense-making. The five professional violinists, of whom I was also one, were purposely selected for this study because of their extensive flow experiences during solo and chamber music performances. My own participation in the study is not in conflict with the core principles of IPA. The participants' profiles added to the study's uniqueness, because they are all professional performers and violin teachers in South Africa.

Data were collected by conducting in-depth, semi-structured online video interviews. Rigorous data analysis was conducted by using seven steps suggested by Smith *et al.* (2022:88-102). Eight group experiential themes emerged from the data. These themes are: 1) The importance of preparation; 2) Awareness and managing thoughts and attention; 3) Emotion, intention and the message of the music; 4) Interactive musical relationships; 5) The audience's role in the performer's flow experience; 6) The influence of past experiences; 7) Unique interpretations of flow; and 8) The outcomes of having experienced or not experienced flow.

This study is the first of its kind in South Africa as it highlights professional South African performing violinists' unique flow experiences during solo and chamber music performances. The study contributes to the improvement of practice by creating increased awareness of the conditions that promote and inhibit flow experiences for professional, amateur, and student performers as well as music teachers.

Keywords

Flow; solo and chamber music; performance; violinists' lived experiences; interpretative phenomenological analysis

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1 Introduction

With my violin case strapped to my back, I walked down the old cobblestone pathway to the *piazza* of Sant'Agata Feltria in the province of Rimini, Italy. I walked into the old theatre on the furthest corner of the square. The smell of wood and heavy, dusty curtains greeted me. My hands were sweaty from the summer heat. I unpacked my violin backstage and tried to warm up without making a sound. The concert had already started. A cellist was playing. I tried not to listen. I felt uneasy. Nervous.

The audience clapped, and too soon it was my turn to walk on stage. It was a lunchtime concert, and I had dressed rather casually in loose pants, a t-shirt and sandals. As I walked on stage, the floor creaked. The old wooden planks were hollowed out in some places from the decades of footsteps on them. The legs of the piano had to be balanced with some small planks so it would not wobble. I bowed with my accompanist, and on the ascend, I saw my friends sitting in the audience on blue velvet chairs in the narrow little theatre. There were not many people attending the concert. Neither was my teacher. The room was quite empty, making me even more aware of the beautiful hand-painted walls and wooden carvings. Royal blue and gold curtains draped the box seats on the sides.

I tuned softly and smiled at the pianist. She was a friendly and kind young woman from England. I had only played with her twice before our performance. In one of our friendly chats, she told me that she had recently gotten married and how big a difference this had made to all her other relationships. Where people previously saw her as young and inexperienced, this was suddenly no longer the case. I listened to her with a yearning in my heart.

I heard the introduction and soared into the opening of the second movement of Sibelius's violin concerto. As my bow descended onto the strings, I felt as if I was lifted up into the air. Sound flew from my violin and filled the old theatre. From the moment I started playing, I escaped to a place where it was possible and safe to wear my heart on my sleeve. I was absolutely consumed with emotion. I believe I felt Sibelius's lament and struggle. He longed his entire life to belong somewhere. Being a South African studying abroad in Norway at the time, I also longed to feel like I belonged and was accepted. I was also wrestling with deciding whether to stay in Norway or return to South Africa. All these uncertainties were reflected in my music-making and led to my teachers and peers constantly asking me the question: "What do you want to say through this music, Carli?" I could not answer.

During the performance, I poured all my heart, fears, uncertainty, anger and love into that moment – not my playing. It was as if it was a whole experience, not a performance. It was raw, honest and unpretentious. It was an exhilarating moment when I felt entirely present. I did not try to do or say anything. The moment just consumed me completely – as if it had accepted me. When I opened my teary eyes after the last note, I was jolted back into the theatre. I stood astounded and a bit stupidly in awe. What just happened?

I walked off the creaking stage after the audience clapped, and I remember my accompanist and her page-turner saying to me, in a very surprised tone of voice, that the performance was a very special experience that they would remember for a very long time. I just smiled and nodded as I was too consumed with emotion to thank them. For the first time in my career, I had found my voice as a performer. I managed to say what I wanted to say. What a deep sense of enjoyment...

My experience described in the vignette above inspired this qualitative study as it was the most vivid flow experience I have experienced as a violinist. 'Flow' is a term established by the Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990:14) and can be described as an optimal experience in which the psychological state of being fully engaged in the pursuit of an activity is experienced so intensely that nothing else matters. Flow is also described as "the holistic sensation that people feel when they act in total involvement" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000:36), being "in the zone", and is similar to "peak experience" and "optimal experience" (Tan & Sin, 2020:36). Csikszentmihalyi (2014:133) developed nine conditions for flow. Flow has these dimensions: (1) a challenge-skill balance, where one's skill must be sufficient to support the challenges presented by the activity; (2) action-awareness merging, meaning one must be certain what one's actions lead to; (3) having clear goals and knowing instantaneously how well one is doing by immediately being able to objectively judge one's own playing; (4) unambiguous feedback; (5) concentration on the task at hand, where one's mind must be completely focussed on the activity to such an extent that one cannot be distracted; (6) sense of control to such an extent that failure is not a concern; (7) loss of self-consciousness and how other people perceive you; (8) transformation of time; (9) and autotelic experience where one performs the activity simply for the experience itself. My flow experience in Italy was an ultimate peak performance and was filled with intense happiness and pleasure (Marin & Bhattacharya, 2013). The memory of this experience will forever serve as an inspiration for me to experience flow again.

This memory also helped me to define the problem addressed by this study in terms of two main aspects, namely 1) the challenge for violinists to generate regular flow experiences; and 2) the lack of violin-specific literature about the flow experiences of violinists.

Firstly, I had the wonderful privilege of experiencing flow during my performance in Italy, but that specific experience has become so idealised in my memory that I find it difficult to experience such an intense level of flow again in my performances. Although there aren't violin-specific studies indicating how to deal with the problem of not being able to experience your highest level of flow again after you have experienced it once, research does indicate factors that decrease the possibility of creating general flow.

Flow and anxiety have a conflicting relationship (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990:72). Musical performance anxiety is a phenomenon often addressed in music research. MPA is most often regarded as a social phobia (Osborne & Franklin, 2002:86) as the contextual and background variables contributing to MPA have a social relation. These variables include performance context (whether you play solo, in a group, for a recording, in a practice room or for an exam), orchestral role, gender, age and culture (Cohen & Bodner, 2021:27–30). Studies have shown that performing in the presence of authoritative figures, educators, or someone who is evaluating the performance causes significantly more anxiety in musicians (Abril, 2007:3).

If the challenge-skill dimension is not in balance, this could also add to the MPA (Loepthien & Leipold, 2021:2). Music performance anxiety is often thought of as stage fright, but when symptoms increase to such an extent that the performance suffers and mental, physical and emotional well-being are in jeopardy, the term 'stage fright' becomes less appropriate and is replaced with the notion of music performance anxiety (McGrath *et al.*, 2017:14). It has been reported that anxiety arises when performers feel that they are not in control of a situation (Abril, 2007:3). Diaz (2018) discovered that musicians with a higher trait mindfulness experiences less music performance anxiety on stage. However, McGrath *et al.* (2017:15) argue that MPA can also occur even when the performer is adequately prepared. Dobos *et al.* (2019:4) explain that musicians need complex skills, intense practice, physical and mental rehearsal, and their profession makes extreme demands on memory and cognitive abilities. MPA may be associated with the fear of not being able to master the relevant tasks because the expectations exceed the capacity of the performer (Dobos *et al.*, 2019:3). Kenny (2010:433) also states that professional musicians value their identities as musicians very much and struggle to disentangle their view of their own value from the view that they can perform well on their instruments. This view makes performing violinists and other high-level performers very prone to anxiety, because they are more likely to believe that if they fail on their instrument, they also fail as people.

Although little research has been conducted on music performance enhancement, Cohen and Bodner (2021:26) state that there have been new developments in studies of flow in music performance, and they indicated that developing techniques for facilitating flow might help reduce musical performance anxiety and inspire optimal performance. These techniques include skills for regulating their affective states and dealing with stress and echo Loeptien and Leipold's (2021:4) reference to a flexible self-concept. A flexible self-concept describes an individual's ability to regard a situation from different perspectives and to adjust to unexpected circumstances or events.

The flow state is very similar to what Bloom and Skutnick-Henley (2005:25) describe as mindfulness. Essential factors of mindfulness include awareness, attention and intention (Grossenbacher & Quaglia, 2017:1580). These factors are in turn similar to what Green and Gallwey (2015:35–36) refer to as “relaxed concentration”. A relaxed form of concentration is necessary to achieve the fifth dimension of flow, namely concentration on the task at hand (Calitz, 2020:14). Mindfulness, along with self-kindness and common humanity, is also one of the building blocks of self-compassion, which studies have shown to be a valuable tool for performers to relieve music performance anxiety and to reduce the pressure to achieve the impossible (Oosthuizen, 2024:7). Therefore, increasing mindfulness during music performance could create opportunities for flow states to occur. Langer (1997:1) states that a mindful approach to an activity has three characteristics, namely the continuous generating of new classifications, openness to new information, and a complete awareness of different perspectives. From this perspective, finding flow requires pursuing activities that challenge you to such an extent that they require new behaviours, perceptions and perspectives without becoming overwhelming (Bloom & Skutnick-Henley, 2005:25). Studies also show that negative judgements may inhibit the flow state, but controlling the negative thought by practising mindfulness can help the flow state to reappear (Brown, 2020:84).

In a study conducted by Bloom and Skutnick-Henley (2005:24), the question was raised as to why some musicians experience flow often, while others do not. They asked 90 adult instrumental musicians who had experienced flow what they thought led to their experience. Six themes emerged in response to the question: the love of music, familiarity with the music, emotionality, letting go, connection with others, and concentration/focus. Despite acknowledging these features, some performers still struggle more than others to experience flow (Bloom & Skutnick-Henley, 2005:25).

Zielke *et al.* (2023:3) conducted a study where eight college music students were asked to reflect on a performance where they experienced flow. The participants' inducing flow factors

were categorised into two groups, namely musical factors and performance factors. The musical factors consisted of swelling dynamics and musical agogics. The participants claimed that these musical and technical challenges helped them to stay focused. The performance factors included memorization, improvisation, no anxiety about mistakes, and an emotional connection to a favourite part of the music. Regarding disruptive factors during performance, the participants stated that problematic intonation, anxiety about technical issues, mistakes, and being out of sync with the group had a major disruptive influence.

Another South African-based study found that full-time and part-time orchestra musicians have different factors influencing their flow. Full-time musicians' flow experiences are influenced by income, available time, frequency of playing, pressure, and playing music for the love of it. These musicians are dependent on the income generated from their playing and often have to take on more work to make ends meet, resulting in a tired, absent-minded musician who struggles to experience flow. Since this is not the case for part-time musicians, they are free to play simply for the joy of it and are more likely to experience flow often (Viljoen, 2018:62). Although these studies give valuable insights into elements that are helpful for facilitating flow, they are not specific to how to achieve recurring flow experiences, and are not specific to violinists.

The second aspect of the problem is the lack of literature about flow experiences for violinists. Although studies have been conducted on the flow experiences of performers (Bloom & Skutnick-Henley, 2005; Cohen & Bodner, 2021; Ford *et al.*, 2020; Loepthien & Leipold, 2021; Iusca, 2015; Panebianco-Warrens, 2014; Sinnamon *et al.*, 2012; Sinnett *et al.*, 2020; Tan *et al.*, 2021; Wrigley and Emmerson, 2013), none of them focus specially on the violin or clarify whether there is any association between flow and playing the violin. Wrigley and Emmerson (2013:302) found in their study that flow experiences might be limited to a specific instrumental group. Their participants consisted of string, piano, woodwind, voice and brass players. The findings showed no variation in flow experience between the instrument families. However, the participants were exclusively music students and not professional performers. Investigating the association between flow and instrument among professional musicians can provide valuable insights for performers and teachers (Cohen & Bodner, 2021:29). Although one study has been conducted on flow in violin playing (Akutsu, 2018:126), the participant was a two-year-old child and not a professional performer. Another similar study has been done on flow for a double bass student (Brown, 2020:22), but in this case the study is neither based on a professional performer nor violin-specific. Orlandi (2020:99) explored the lived experiences of five professional pianists and found that when performing familiar or preferred styles, the pianists experienced flow more often. The pianists also expressed a strong correlation between musical

preference, the perceived emotional content of the repertoire, and flow. This study, however, focused on pianists rather than violinists, and on the concept of spirituality, and not exclusively on flow.

In a study conducted by Granville (2024:51) the findings showed that it is very important to create the optimal conditions for flow to occur, rather than making achievement of flow the main goal and forcing it to happen. By focusing on the musical goals and dedicating your thoughts and actions to the music itself, one creates the natural conditions for flow to occur. Although Granville's (2024:50) study is helpful in identifying factors promoting flow, it is based on a horn player's experience and is not violin-specific.

A study conducted by Wentink and Van der Merwe (2020:65) showed that flow was achieved in a group of musicians who, through the help of Dalcroze sessions, managed to be more aware of their colleagues' parts and enhance their listening. This led to efficiency and time saving during the rehearsals as the participants were more aware of each other. The Dalcroze sessions also helped the participants get to know each other more quickly, contributing to the group's efficiency. These factors led to the participants experiencing flow and the group functioning at full capacity (Wentink & Van der Merwe, 2020:92). Another study focused on the flow experiences of part-time and full-time orchestral musicians (Viljoen, 2018:19), and a related study investigated the effect of MPA on 363 orchestral musicians' flow experiences (Spahn *et al.*, 2021:4), but neither of these studies are violin specific and lack a focus on the individual performer. My study will differ from these as it will be violin-specific and focus on chamber music and solo performance.

The desire to experience and express feelings through music is one of the most salient predictors of flow proneness (Bloom & Skutnick-Henley, 2005:25). Being a performer and playing and expressing yourself through your instrument is central to one's self-definition as a musician (Loepthien & Leipold, 2021:4), and being able to experience flow through your instrument improves your subjective wellbeing. In this study I will investigate whether the nature and technical demands of the violin as an instrument have any influence on a performer's flow proneness and experience.

This study differs from that of Bloom and Skutnick-Henley (2005:28) as the participants are professional musicians rather than amateurs, and it focuses on flow experiences, specifically during violin solo and chamber music performances, rather than on general musical experience. There seems to be no similar study in the literature at present. Thus, this study will fill a gap in the literature. All the participants are professional violinists who teach and perform in South

Africa, which means that the study is the first of its kind in the South African context, to my knowledge.

This study will contribute to raising awareness among not only violinists, but also musicians in general, of the possibilities for experiencing flow by providing valuable insights into the conditions that promote or inhibit flow experiences for professional violinists during performance. These insights will also benefit music teachers by providing them with knowledge and skills to empower their students to promote flow. It could also benefit academics as it will provide useful information for further research in this field as it expands the scholarly literature on flow experiences during violin performances.

1.1 Purpose statement

The purpose of this IPA study is to explore how five professional violinists, who teach and perform in South Africa, make sense of their lived flow experiences during solo and chamber music performances.

1.2 Research questions

1.2.1 Central question

How do five professional violinists, who teach and perform in South Africa, make sense of their lived flow experiences during solo and chamber music performances?

1.2.2 Secondary question

To what extent does Csikszentmihalyi's (2014:133) flow theory explain the inhibiting and promoting conditions of flow experiences for the five professional violinists?

2 Procedures

2.1 Research design

In this study, I use a qualitative research design because the aim of the study is to explore and understand how individuals make sense of specific experiences in their lives (Creswell, 2013:47; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Smith, 2011; Smith *et al.*, 2009). Since I have experience with the phenomenon, I have a particular interest in it. For individuals to understand their own experiences, they must apply sense-making endeavours, which are multifaceted, varied and personal (Orlandi, 2020:6). During the data analysis process of the five participants, I applied a personal reflexive approach, because I explored a phenomenon that I wish to make sense of myself. In this regard, I was also aware of my personal experience's possible influence on the interpretative process (Creswell, 2013:47).

2.2 Research approach: interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

In this qualitative study, I made use of an IPA approach. IPA is a strategy of inquiry that examines how people make sense of their experiences (Smith *et al.*, 2009:1). In this study, my focus is on exploring how the five professional violinists make sense of their real-life experiences of the flow phenomenon during solo and chamber music performances. The IPA approach is based upon three theoretical foundations, namely “phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography” (Smith *et al.*, 2009:11).

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to studying every day, specific, lived human experience by examining the participants' perceptions of the phenomenon (Smith *et al.*, 2009:11; Van Manen, 2016:27). A crucial principle of phenomenological inquiry is that experience should be examined on its own terms and just the way it is, rather than being based on predefined theoretical categories (Smith & Nizza, 2022:7). Thus, when we are conducting a phenomenological inquiry we must put aside any presupposed views of the world, as these can act as a barrier to understanding the experience that is under investigation from the participant's point of view (Smith & Nizza, 2022:7). As I am also a participant in my own study, I made sure to undertake my own reflection on my experience first before conducting the interviews with the other participants. In doing this, I avoided being influenced by their viewpoints. My reflections prior to conducting the other interviews can be seen in Addendum A.

The meaning that participants ascribed to the experience is analysed through processes of interpretation, making the IPA study hermeneutic (Smith *et al.*, 2009:35). Hermeneutics refers to the general theory of interpretation, and the process is described as both empathetic and critical

(Shinebourne, 2011:18). The researcher must be empathetic with the participant in order to try to understand their experience before then critically analysing the experience from a distance (Smith *et al.*, 2009:36). The experiences of the participants are extensively discussed and analysed separately, making the study idiographic.

Idiography focuses on the specific individual, resulting in precise personal details (Shinebourne, 2011:23; Smith *et al.*, 2009:29). Smith and Nizza (2022:7) state that this is best achieved by focusing on single cases and analysing them individually before making possible comparisons between cases. In this IPA, a single case refers to an individual's music-making story. By focusing on one case at a time, it is possible to look at each case in great detail, on its own terms and context, achieving great depth in the analysis (Smith *et al.*, 2022:37). This approach offers great insight into how meaning making occurs (Smith & Nizza, 2022:8).

2.3 Participants

To comply with IPA principles, I followed an idiographic approach by ensuring the participants for my study are limited to a small group of individuals (Smith & Osborn, 2008:56; Smith *et al.*, 2009:49). For this study, I identified five participants who were willing to be part of this study and to share their personal experiences of flow during performances with me. The participants are male and female, aged between 26 and 64, speak English and Afrikaans, and fall within a middle socio-economic class. No vulnerable population groups were involved. The participants are homogeneous to the extent that they are professional South African violinists who actively perform and teach. This allowed me to examine convergence and divergence in detail (Smith *et al.*, 2009:3).

2.3.1 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Prospective participants must play the violin and have experienced flow during a performance. They must be classified as professional and earn a living from performing and teaching music. They must hold at least a Bachelor of Music (BMus) degree. Lastly, they must be performing and teaching currently and actively in South Africa, but do not need to be South African born. If participants do not meet the inclusion criteria they will be excluded.

2.4 Role of the researcher

In this study, I have a unique role as I will also be a participant in my own study. Braun and Clarke (2022:51) state that reflexivity means turning the researcher lens onto oneself so as to

recognize and take responsibility for one's own situatedness in the specific research and the effect that this may have on the questions asked, data collection and the interpretation of data. Wentink and Van der Merwe (2020:3) also adopted this form of research as Wentink was also a participant in her own study. Since this is a novel approach, Wentink and Van der Merwe contacted Smith, Flowers and Larkin to find out whether this is permissible in IPA. Larkin, co-writer of the handbook on IPA, assured them in a personal email written to them on 15 February 2015 that "it is unusual, but it can be done, and it isn't in conflict with the core conceptual underpinnings of IPA."

In an IPA study, the researcher takes on the role of primary instrument for data collection (Merriam, 2009:18). Since I am a professional violinist who actively performs and teaches in South Africa and have experienced flow, I have adequate experience to make sense of the data that will be collected. Although my experience allows me to understand the participants' experiences better, the general assumption is that it might also cause me to be biased and judgemental. As Bresler (1995:4) advised, I remained consciously aware of and monitored my biases and prejudices when collecting and analysing data.

I listened with an open mind to interpret the participant's experiences from an insider's perspective (Smith *et al.*, 2009:42). Furthermore, I remained tactful, respectful and sensitive about their experiences when engaging with the participants as well as when processing and analysing the data (Shinebourne, 2011:27). As I am also a participant in my own study, I made sure to write down my reflections before starting the interviews with the other participants. This method ensured that my views were not influenced by the participants' responses.

2.5 Data collection

The main and most effective method of data collection in IPA studies is in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Eatough & Smith, 2008:188; Smith *et al.*, 2009:57). I adopted this method by conducting online video interviews with each of the participants, which encouraged and facilitated reflection (Eatough & Smith, 2008:179–194). During the interviews, which lasted for about an hour, I asked the participants questions (Addendum B), and they answered and talked about their experiences. During the interviews I sometimes described flow a state of peak performance to make it more easily understandable for those who were a bit more unfamiliar with the flow theory. This study did not require multiple interviews or follow-up questions. The participants had the opportunity to choose between Skype, Zoom or any other online platform that also has a recording function for their convenience. This created the opportunity for the participants to discuss their experiences and meaning-making in depth in a safe environment.

As I am also a participant in my own study, I completed my own “interview” by recording my own reflections before conducting the interviews with the other participants to avoid my own sense-making being influenced by their sense-making. The success of the interviews stemmed from the degree to which the questions explored the uniqueness of the participants’ experiences (Colaizzi, 1978:58). The interviews were video recorded, but these recordings will not be available for public viewing. They are for my eyes only. The visual aspect of the video recording was beneficial for me in understanding the words of the participants better by also being able to read their body language when they talk. These recordings thus helped me to write detailed transcripts in order to do a rigorous analysis.

2.5.1 Sampling strategies

I applied purposive sampling to my study as this is theoretically consistent with the qualitative paradigm and IPA (Smith *et al.*, 2009:54). To comply with these requisites, I purposively chose participants who were able to provide insights into the flow experiences of violinists during performances.

2.5.2 Recruitment strategies

Possible participants were invited to participate through a WhatsApp message that provided a brief explanation of the study and their role, should they choose to participate. In this message I also stressed that participation was completely voluntary. They were given ample time to go through the information. No pressure was put on them to participate. Some participants declined the invitation as they felt that they would not be able to contribute to the subject of flow. The participants who did choose to participate replied to my message in their own time, freely, and without feeling pressured to agree to participate.

2.6 Data analysis

Smith *et al.* (2022:88-102) suggest seven steps to analyse and interpret data rigorously. This process was applied to every case individually to support the idiographic nature of an IPA. The first step was to read and re-read the transcribed interviews in order to fully understand and organise the data. During the second step, exploratory notes were made to identify information that could be useful to the study (see code list from ATLAS.ti 24 in Addendum C. Five separate copybundles are included in order to analyse each case in isolation and maintain the idiographic nature of this IPA study). Experiential statements on these data were constructed separately for each participant in step three. Step four was to search for connections across experiential

statements, within one case, and to group similar statements in clusters. In step five, I generated the personal experiential themes (PETS) and in some cases, created sub-themes in order to show the specific set of experiential statements that were brought together in developing the personal experiential theme (Smith *et al.*, 2022:98). I then consolidated and organised the themes in a table. In the sixth step, I applied the previous five steps to the other cases until all the analyses had been completed. Lastly, in the seventh step I organised the personal experiential themes and sub-themes to develop group experiential themes across cases (Smith *et al.*, 2022:102). All seven steps of the data analysis were carried out by me using ATLAS.ti 24 software. My promoter, Prof. Liesl van der Merwe, who is the host and presenter of MASARA's data-analysis training course, trained me to be able to use ATLAS.ti 24, and also co-coded and examined my analysis.

2.7 Trustworthiness

To ensure quality in my work, I evaluated my IPA study against Smith's (2011:24–25) seven guidelines in his article "Evaluating the contribution of interpretative phenomenological analysis". These guidelines require that the study 1) be focussed, 2) have solid data, and 3) the analysis be rigorous. In my study, I applied these guidelines and ensured that there was 4) adequate space for elaboration on each theme, 5) that the analysis was not only descriptive but also interpretative, and 6) that it identified points of convergence and divergence. All human experience is variable and nuanced, and is located historically, culturally and socially; the interpretation based on my qualitative analysis reflected that. Lastly, I ensured that 7) my study was sensibly written (Smith, 2011:24).

To ensure the validity of my study, I used the strategy of member checking (Creswell, 2013:252) after my findings had been completed to confirm the accuracy and trustworthiness of the findings. This was done by asking the participants to assess their transcribed interviews for accuracy as well as to evaluate the findings that emerged after the in-depth analysis, confirming whether or not I had understood them correctly. The feedback I received from the participants was positive overall, except for a few small changes. Piet changed the explanation of his "naming fix", or in other words the way he makes small changes to his bow during a performance to feel more in control, in order for the performance to be more clear and understandable. Zanta asked that some parts of her data be omitted. Vladimir changed some terms in order to convey a clearer representation of his setting. Miro and Mary were happy with the findings related to their experience. Also, adding to the validity of my study, I provided evidence that contradicts the general perspective of the theme and thus made the account more realistic and credible (Creswell, 2013:251). I also used peer reviews or debriefing to enhance the accuracy of the findings by asking a person to review and ask questions about my study, so

that the account resonates with people other than the researcher (Creswell, 2013:251). Clarifying my own bias further validated my study. Creswell (2013:252) suggests that commenting on your own experience, bias and prejudices that may influence your interpretation as a qualitative researcher can add vital sensitivity to your study. Sensitivity increases the validity of an IPA (Shinebourne, 2011:21–27). Finally, I constantly evaluated whether I am complying with the requirement for an IPA to provide rich, thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973:3–30). These descriptions were obtained through lengthy, continued and dedicated engagement with the data during the process of data collection, analysis, interpretation and the writing process (Shinebourne, 2011:27).

2.8 Ethics

I applied to the Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC) of North-West University for approval of this study and to determine whether there was a possible risk for the participants, and received clearance. My ethics number is NWU-00989-22-A7. The participants were informed of the purpose of the study and that they had “the right to withdraw at any time” without consequences (Smith *et al.*, 2009:59). I asked the participants for their informed consent to conduct the online face-to-face interviews, possible follow-up interviews, and to use the results of the analysis and interpretation of the data for the purpose of this study. They were also given the option of anonymity and the opportunity to correct and confirm their interview transcriptions (Smith *et al.*, 2009:53). Three participants chose to use their real names and two participants chose pseudonyms. No deception of any form was practised regarding the research subjects during the course of this research. As the researcher, I ensured that no participant was harmed at any stage of the process and that I respected the integrity of the participants’ personal experiences (Smith *et al.*, 2009:53). This included allowing the participants to take the time needed to rest whenever they got tired.

The participants benefited from the final product of this research as it provided them with valuable insights into how to experience flow again. The participants were not compensated in any way.

Data on the research subjects will not be accessible to a third party. I protected the confidentiality of the data collected by uploading it to the NWU’s password-protected cloud, where it will be stored for seven years. This will also protect the participants against breaches of confidentiality and invasion of privacy, as data on the cloud cannot be accessed by anyone other than the person who uploaded it. After seven years of storage, the data will be permanently deleted.

The data and related findings will be disseminated by means of submitting an article for publication to the *Psychology of Music*. Initially the formal assignment will be placed on embargo until the article has been published; after that my formal assignment will be available on the University's internal database, Boloka. The formal assignment and article will benefit musicians, specifically string players and researchers in the fields of music and psychology. Although my final findings will be openly shared, the original data collected from the participants will not be reused and shared with other researchers for secondary outcomes.

2.9 Integrated whole of formal assignment and two performances

I chose option B in the yearbook as the course of action for this doctorate. Option B requires that my formal assignment and two of the four performances must form an integrated whole. I created this integration by choosing my repertoire for the two performances based on my findings from the interviews conducted. Five professional violinists were asked about their flow experiences during performances, and from the list of repertoire in which they experienced flow, I then chose my programmes for the two performances. Prof. Piet Koornhof served as promoter for this practical part of the degree. The programmes consisted of Beethoven's Sonata No. 5 for violin and piano, C. Franck's Sonata for violin and piano, Kreisler's Oriental Dance, Arvo Pärt's *Fratres*, six pieces by Balys Dvarionas, and the second movements of Brahms's, Mendelssohn's and Sibelius's violin concertos. The programme notes included participants' reflections on the conditions, contexts and stories of their flow experiences while performing specific repertoire (see addendum D). The video recordings of these performances can be viewed through these links: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1--ZPT8mkxGvxzbpL9aOK7fb5cLpNL7qr/view?usp=drivesdk> and <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-FmMthRS1GO024LIZzUOISaJ38zkh3vr/view?usp=drivesdk>

3 Findings

3.1 Mary's lived flow experiences during music performances

(Pseudonym chosen by the participant as a personal reminder to be still at God's feet even though there is much to be done, like Mary from the Bible, unlike her sister Martha.)

Mary is a performer who is very enthusiastic about making meaningful music. Although she has not been a professional performer for many years, she has had profound flow experiences. Mary studied violin performance for six years and performs regularly as a soloist in small chamber groups and with many of the country's philharmonic orchestras. She also teaches violin, viola and piano at a high school and in her home studio. She finds it very inspiring to talk about her flow experiences. From her interview, the following six personal experiential themes emerged after analysing the data:

- **Elements that promote flow**

1. Being present: "The feeling of being totally focused and consumed in the moment" (2:97)¹
2. The conditions of flow that were present during her performance: "I feel challenged and satisfied" (2:7)
3. Facilitating flow experiences during solo and chamber music performances: "My whole body had goosebumps and my heart was trembling with the tangible feeling of God's presence. This inspired me and my playing" (2:70)
4. My identity: "I found my voice as a performer" (2:53)
5. Teaching flow by creating opportunities for flow experiences to occur during teaching: "Relax and think of nothing other than enjoying the moment" (2:125)

- **Elements that inhibit flow**

6. Constant comparison, intimidation, performance anxiety and negative attitudes: "I compare all my performances to that one particular vivid flow experience and if I did not experience flow as intensely as that one time, I am not as excited or fulfilled as I should be" (2:96)

Elements that promote flow

3.1.1 Personal Experiential Theme 1: Being present: "The feeling of being totally focused and consumed in the moment" (2:97)

¹ An ATLAS.ti 24 reference. The first number indicates the document number, and the second number indicates the code number.

For Mary, being present is a “feeling of being totally focused and consumed in the moment” (2:97). In order to be present, one needs to be in a state of “full involvement” (2:25). She acknowledges what a strong role concentration plays in being present:

I had very good concentration. I remember being aware of my playing and being able to focus on the technical things I had to remember, but not at all being distracted or even aware of the audience (2:116).

For Mary, being on stage and experiencing a certain degree of stress results “in a state of full concentration” (2:77). This state of full concentration often leads to a phenomenon described as “being in the zone”, where one is amazed by what one’s body just does by itself:

My fingers simply just did what they had to do and melodies I had never thought of before just popped up in my head (2:73).

To enable being in the zone, Mary believes one must “simply try and relax and think of nothing other than enjoying the moment” (2:125), again highlighting the importance of the moment and being present. It is also when Mary is in the zone that she experiences an escape to a safe space. When telling me about one of her flow experiences, she described that she “escaped to a place where it was possible and safe to wear my heart on my sleeve” (2:39). During this escape she also experienced transcendence:

I heard the introduction and soared into the opening... As my bow descended onto the strings, I felt as if I was lifted into the air. (2:38).

She had “lost all perception of time. It was as if time had become a blur. All that mattered was the moment” (2:120).

3.1.2 Personal Experiential Theme 2: The conditions of flow that were present during her performance: "I feel challenged and satisfied" (2:7)

Having a good challenge-skill balance: “I had a lot of practice time and many lessons..., so technically I was very well prepared” (2:105)

Mary experienced that many of Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) conditions of flow were present during her flow experience. She felt that she had a good balance between challenge and skill:

“I had a lot of practice time and many lessons..., so technically I was very well prepared” (2:105).

Because of this balance, she had the freedom of experiencing effortlessness while playing. She did not have to think too much about “technical things” (2:109) during her playing, which allowed her the ability to simply “listen and adjust the sound” (2:109).

Receiving immediate feedback from herself and the audience: “I receive energy from the audience” (2:78)

Mary mentions that she receives energy from the audience (2:78) and that their reaction is a form of immediate feedback for her. She also experienced a form of immediate feedback from herself during a performance by immediately knowing that she was doing well:

I was surprised during the performance, thinking “wow, that sounded good” or “that felt nice” (2:113).

Experiencing a loss of self-consciousness: “I was not at all self-conscious in terms of the audience” (2:119)

Mary finds great “satisfaction in the thought that *her* playing could be very meaningful and impactful” (2:11). She explains that when she experiences flow, she is “not at all self-conscious in terms of the audience”, but that she is very aware of her own feelings and emotions, focusing on her own personal enjoyment or awareness of the performance (2:119). She states that when she makes music, she feels “challenged and satisfied” (2:5).

3.1.3 Personal Experiential Theme 3: Facilitating flow experiences: “My whole body had goosebumps and my heart was trembling with the tangible feeling of God’s presence. This inspired me and my playing” (2:70)

Although Mary recognises how the conditions of flow promoted her flow experience during performance, she also claims that many other factors contributed to experiencing flow.

Focusing on and expressing her emotions: “I love the experience of feeling emotions more powerfully when I play” (2:10)

Mary regards the stage as a place where “raw emotion is celebrated” (2:84) and sees her emotional personality as an advantage. When on stage, she tries to pour all her emotions into the moment which results in “raw, honest and unpretentious” music-making (2:48). She also tries to understand the composer’s emotions and find a way to mimic or associate with them in order to provide an accurate rendering of the composer’s intention of the music. Being on stage amplifies Mary’s experience of emotion to a greater extent than she normally does in the practice room. Being able to express these “powerful” emotions (2:10) offers a great deal of emotional relief, which contributes to mental well-being.

Having a clear intention: “My main goal for all of my performances is to be a disciple” (2:136)

Mary also finds that intention works powerfully as a facilitating factor. Being a Christian, her first and foremost intention is of a religious nature as she tries to be a disciple through her performances. By doing this she finds a clear goal and motivation for the performance. She also

tries to “help an audience member to also feel something that might make a positive difference in their life” (2:19), and to “honour the composer” (2:20).

Positive interactive relationships between colleagues on stage, and between performer and audience: “I am sharing my feelings, or the composer’s feelings, and emotions with the audience” (2:80)

Another factor influencing Mary's flow is interactive relationships. She found that she developed a special connection and like-mindedness with her colleagues on stage, which contributed to the success of the performance. An interactive relationship between the performer and the audience is also important to Mary and the exchange of emotions generates a great deal of energy for her.

Being aware of her sensory experiences: “The smell of wood and heavy, dusty curtains greeted me” (2:29)

Mary found that the sensory experiences she had on stage added to the intensity of the performance, which contributed to her flow experience. On stage Mary was aware of her visual, auditory, olfactory and vestibular senses. An interesting observation she made was how impactful the setting was on the experience. The fact that it was summer in Italy and that the concert was in a beautiful, authentic little concert hall full of character and detail added to the inspirational and romantic environment.

With my violin case strapped to my back, I walked down the old cobblestone pathway to the piazza of Sant’Agata (2:28).

The room was quite empty, making me even more aware of the beautiful hand-painted walls and wooden carvings. Royal blue and gold curtains draped the box seats on the sides (2:36).

Mary was dressed in loose pants and a t-shirt, which added to her comfort and relaxed state of mind. The concert took place during lunchtime, which is not the most conventional time for a concert. It may be that by diverting from the normal state of affairs, a performer is helped into a new or different state of concentration which promotes the conditions for flow.

Having the feeling of worthiness: “The moment just consumed me completely – as if it had accepted me” (2:49)

Mary vividly recalled a positive feeling during her flow experience. She described it by saying “the moment just consumed me completely - as if it had accepted me” (2:49). During this specific time in her life, acceptance was a big topic in various areas in her life. Being consumed in the moment and experiencing flow thus gave her a feeling of worthiness. Through this flow experience Mary experienced peak performance on many levels and felt that she had, for the first time, “found her voice as a performer” (2:54). This resulted in “a deep sense of enjoyment”

for her (2:54). Mary also feels that having experienced flow serves as a facilitating factor on its own.

Once you have tasted it, you will always want more, which results in working harder in order to be well prepared so that you can just let go and let flow take over (2:133).

3.1.4 Personal Experiential Theme 4: My identity: “I found my voice as a performer” (2:53)

During her studies, Mary experienced a lack of identity as a musician as a very big obstacle in many aspects of her being.

All these uncertainties reflected in my music-making and resulted in my teachers and peers constantly asking me the question, “What do you want to say through this music?” (2:45)

Her vivid flow experience enabled her to realise that she was able to say what she wanted to say and gave her the validation that she had indeed “found her voice as a performer” (2:53). Mary also finds that religion plays a very big role in her identity. The emotional effect that religious experiences have on her performances greatly contributes to the physical outcome. She mentions that the “tangible feeling of God’s presence” left her with “goosebumps” and a trembling heart (2:68).

Even though Mary did not realise it when choosing the violin as her instrument at a young age, she strongly feels that it has come to form a big part of her identity. Physically, the range of the violin fits with that of her own voice, so it is easy for her to associate with the instrument. She also likes to think that she is imitating the voice of a singer when she plays and for this the range of the violin as well as the fact that the “bow can be compared to the breath of a singer” (2:13) helps a great deal. As mentioned before, Mary is a very emotional musician and claims to play the “violin specifically because it is such an emotional instrument” (2:12).

With your left hand you can control the vibrato in any way you want, serving as a very effective tool to convey a specific emotion (2:14).

3.1.5 Personal Experiential Theme 5: Teaching flow by creating opportunities for flow experiences to occur during teaching: “Relax and think of nothing other than enjoying the moment” (2:125)

Mary admits that she does not specifically inform her students about flow and how to achieve the state. She does, however, teach them to “relax and think of nothing other than enjoying the moment” (2:125) when performing. This is partly because she does not believe that “a beginner violinist can understand flow during performance, or maybe [she] just does not know how to

teach flow to them” (2:122). She also admits to being eager about “researching the topic of how to teach flow to beginners” (2:125).

Elements that inhibit flow

3.1.6 Personal Experiential Theme 6: Constant comparison, intimidation, performance anxiety and negative attitudes: “I compare all my performances to that one particular vivid flow experience and if I did not experience flow as intensely as that one time, I am not as excited or fulfilled as I should be” (2:96)

Just as experiencing flow can act as the best encouragement, there are also some cases where it may serve as discouragement. Mary compares all her performances to her most vivid flow experience in Italy and the pressure of achieving such an extreme level of flow again sometimes inhibits her freedom to experience flow again.

I compare all my performances to that one particular vivid flow experience and if I did not experience flow as intensely as that one time, I am not as excited or fulfilled as I should be. Constantly comparing my current performance takes the joy out of the performance and sometimes even serves as discouragement (2:96).

Mary believes that negative experiences can either inhibit or promote the occurrence of flow. One may see nerves, judgemental attitudes from the audience, competition, physical discomfort in terms of time sacrifices, or diversion from the normal plan as a negative experiences but Mary achieved flow despite experiencing many of these factors.

Before entering the stage one often feels “uneasy” or “nervous” (2:31), but this feeling can add to focusing one’s concentration on the task at hand. Depending on one’s personality, judgemental attitudes or competition may serve as an encouragement to achieve higher results. Physical discomfort and diverting from the normal may promote flow simply by disturbing the comfort zone in which we stagnate so often.

In other cases, negative experiences such as intimidation, bad weather conditions, uncongenial colleagues, too much performance anxiety or fear have a totally devastating outcome and allow no opportunity at all for flow to take place.

It is impossible for me to experience flow when I have a lot of performance anxiety. I cannot enjoy the moment when I am scared and stressed (2:135).

With playing the violin being a physical act, factors such as the weather can play a big role in performing successfully. Heat and humidity can have a very negative physical impact on being able to play; this can cause a significant shift in concentration and attention, which can inhibit flow. Mary emphasised the high degree to which colleagues’ attitudes can influence your ability

to experience flow. She says that it is very difficult for her to achieve flow and work with people who are “either very negative about life in general or whose musical ideas I do not agree with” (2:19).

3.2 Prof. Piet Koornhof’s lived flow experiences during music performance

(Participant chose to use his own name as he deemed it unnecessary to use a pseudonym)

Prof. Piet Koornhof is an extremely talented performing violinist and teacher at North-West University with extensive performance, recording and teaching experience. He grew up in a musical home and was exposed to classical music from a very early age. He chose to play the violin because he “likes the sound very much” (2:10), and he “suspects that a person’s ear chooses the instrument that suits your way of listening and your personality” (2:12). In our interview Piet was excited to tell his stories and was able to give rich descriptions of his experiences.

The following nine themes emerged from the analysis of Prof. Koornhof’s interview data:

- **Elements that promote flow**

1. Attention management: “It is extremely important to manage my attention in the right way” (3:13)
2. Listening: “Without exception, listening is my gateway to flow” (3:25)
3. Preparation: “If I do not feel sufficiently prepared, then the flow experience is basically impossible” (3:14)
4. Chamber music: “You are combining with another musical personality and that is just amazing to me” (3:49)
5. Not making flow the main goal: “If you strive for happiness all the time, you will probably not reach it” (3:53)
6. The audience: “When you experience that the audience is with you, that they are part of the musical experience and completely involved, and part of the flow, that helps to achieve flow” (3:10)
7. The nature of flow experiences: “It just feels exactly right” (4:6)
8. Outcomes of flow experiences and not having experienced them: Having experienced flow “makes one a better performer because it gives you something really meaningful to aim for” (4:3)

- **Elements that inhibit flow**

9. Allowing too much mind space for disruptive thoughts: “If you pay sufficient attention to the right things, then there is actually no attention space left for disruptive thoughts” (4:2)

Elements that promote flow

3.2.1 Personal Experiential Theme 1: Attention management: “It is extremely important to manage my attention in the right way” (3:13)

Focusing on sensory perception: “When I feel I am a bit out of it and not really in the moment, it helps to focus on the feeling of my fingers and what my bow is doing” (3:21)

Piet expresses with great emphasis the importance of managing his attention on stage.

It is extremely important to manage my attention in the right way. If I don't do that, the flow experience on stage is elusive. It can even be very elusive (3:13).

He explains that he first has to “get the physical things in place” and that he does that by “being in the moment, by perceiving the sense of touch adequately, and to adequately observe the actions of the bow” (3:22). If the physical things are not in place, he will “deliberately make small adjustments” to his left hand, like pressing lighter or harder to be able to feel exactly where his “fingerprints touch the strings” (3:19) or he will apply his “naming fix” to the bow which entails simply looking at the bow and naming what he sees, so he will say “sounding point 5, 4, 3, 2 or 1” and when he does this, he feels that he regains control very quickly (3:20).

Thinking musically: “A very big part of my attention goes to the meaning and the flow of the music” (3:41)

When the physical requirements are no longer taking up a part of his attention, he “can start thinking musically, and if it comes to a certain point, the flow starts kicking in” (3:22).

My concentration is very focused on musical proportion, but a large part of musical proportion has to do with movement, with the flow of music, pun not intended. So a very big part of my attention goes to the meaning and the flow of the music (3:41), and a big part of my attention also goes to the sound, the sound that I produce. If I feel like I'm producing sound successfully and it is congruent with the musical meaning I want to convey, then I am very happy! Then I am on cloud nine! (3:42).

3.2.2 Personal Experiential Theme 2: Listening: “Without exception, listening is my gateway to flow” (3:25)

Piet realises and admits that when time allows it in the practice room and he can focus intensely and very exclusively on what he hears for a few minutes, then listening is “without exception” his “gateway to flow” (3:25). He says that when he listens in such a focused way, which takes him a while to achieve, he believes that this aids in the integration of all the sensory information, which in turn results in the musical and physical requirements simply falling into place (3:24).

Although Piet is very aware of the physical requirements and the actions he performs to get the desired results, he “does not feel removed” from the situation. He states: “It is not as if I need to constantly give myself instructions. The musical impulse and the action to perform it happens at the same time” (3:34). In other words, action-awareness and musical awareness are the same for him. When these are in balance, he explains that it becomes a “very holistic experience where the separation between you as subject and what you are busy with as object, fades or even disappears completely” (2:22).

3.2.3 Personal Experiential Theme 3: Preparation: “If I do not feel sufficiently prepared, then the flow experience is basically impossible” (3:14)

Another element that is crucial for Piet to be able to experience flow is a sufficient challenge-skill balance.

For me, the first thing is that I need to be sufficiently prepared. If I do not feel sufficiently prepared, then a flow experience is basically impossible (3:14).

When it comes to teaching flow, he believes that flow is a product of certain things first being in place.

So I think my students should hopefully experience flow if they are properly prepared, and they have learnt to manage their attention, to name just a few of the essentials. I don't talk explicitly to them about flow. If they have debilitating stage fright, yes, then we work on it. Sometimes, I try to help them with Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) techniques, or we talk about managing attention or sufficient preparation. I really think that is the basis. Without sufficient preparation, forget it; nothing else is going to happen by itself. You can have all the knowledge about flow in the world, but if you are not sufficiently prepared, you are not going to experience flow (3:54).

3.2.4 Personal Experiential Theme 4: Chamber music: “You are combining with another musical personality and that is just amazing to me” (3:49)

Piet has a true love for chamber music and admits that his easiest way to achieve flow is by simply rehearsing with a colleague. He excitingly stated that he is very seldom intimidated by good players, because he feels “it pulls one up to a greater whole, and that is very enjoyable” (2:42) and “when one really has a good rapport with the people you play with, and if you kind of play through them, then it is much easier to forget yourself than when you actually feel like a soloist on stage” (2:39). He emphasised his appreciation for chamber music by saying “that component of performing with other people, and it is not just the people, it is not just that you are participating in a communal experience with another personality, it is also that you are

combining with another musical personality and that is just amazing to me. That is one of the critical factors in experiencing flow” (3:49).

3.2.5 Personal Experiential Theme 5: Not making flow the main goal: “If you strive for happiness all the time, you will probably not reach it” (3:53)

Another factor that promotes flow for him is not making the experience of achieving flow his main goal for the performance.

I don't think flow should necessarily be a goal all by itself, because I think that can even, to some extent, prevent flow. You know, it is like happiness. If you strive for happiness all the time, you will probably not reach it. Happiness should be the byproduct of having more fundamental things in place. I think it is very much the same thing. Or like love. If you strive for love all the time, it feels wrong. You should do the work required of relating properly to other people, and then... love is the natural result. So, in some sense, for me, flow in music-making should be the result of having the requisite things in place (3:53).

3.2.6 Personal Experiential Theme 6: The audience: “When you experience that the audience is with you, that they are part of the musical experience and completely involved, and part of the flow, that helps to achieve flow” (3:10)

Piet also remarks that the audience plays a role in encouraging his flow experiences on stage. He believes that his feeling of being musically convinced can be transferred to the audience, resulting in them experiencing becoming musically convinced as well. He says, “If one really has the experience on stage that the audience is with you, that the audience also really becomes part of the musical experience, so they are completely involved and kind of with you in the flow of the music”, then the opportunity for flow increases.

3.2.7 Personal Experiential Theme 7: The nature of flow experiences: “It just feels exactly right” (4:6)

Although Piet admits that flow is not something he experiences all the time and that it is sometimes only of short duration, he still describes the flow experience as “literally feeling one with what you do, and with the circumstances in which you do it”.

If I feel I succeed in producing the sound that I want, that I go with the flow of the music, in other words, if my thoughts are predominantly musical and if I am comfortable with how I experience it physically, and I also have the feeling that the audience is

captivated rather than feeling a separation from the audience, then my experience is extra intense (2:35).

He also explains that when experiencing intense flow, he detects no self-awareness in himself.

In some sense, it feels like I am an audience member... One of the signs for me to experience flow is goosebumps, so if I am really successful in producing the sound I want to produce and I am into the music, then I have goosebumps, as if I am an audience member being overwhelmed by the aesthetic experience. That is very definitely part of my experience. If I am really in a flow state, I feel like an audience member experiencing the music (3:44).

With regard to the perception of time, Piet admits that “time seems to stand still, or to put it differently, musical time becomes overriding. It is different from clock time. A long piece can feel very short, and a short piece can subjectively feel very long if you experience intense musical meaning with it. Yes, I think the experience of time is very different from the normal experience of time. I will call it musical time. Musical time dominates in the flow experience” (3:46).

Piet also says that flow can preclude performance anxiety.

A true flow experience precludes performance anxiety. When I am experiencing flow on stage, I have no performance anxiety whatsoever. It feels like I am exactly the way I should be at that moment, doing exactly what I should be doing, but it is also not completely correct to say that because the “I” is not so essential to that experience. A better way of saying it is it just feels right. It just feels exactly right. Time does not matter. It is not a struggle. It is loaded with meaning. The meaningfulness of the experience is just complete, and the whole idea of anxiety does not even make sense in that context. So, if you're taken up by the beauty and the meaning of the music, in other words, if you are having a total aesthetic experience, anxiety does not make sense (4:6).

3.2.8 Personal Experiential Theme 8: Outcomes of flow experiences and not having experienced them: Having experienced flow “makes one a better performer because it gives you something really meaningful to aim for” (4:3)

Piet mentions various outcomes he has experienced as a result of having experienced flow. One is a feeling of “unity with the music, your instrument, the sound you produce and also with the audience” (2:34). This feeling of unity also positively influences his future flow experiences.

[The performance] included a few nice flow experiences, and maybe it influences future flow experiences simply by the fact that one knows you are capable of experiencing flow experiences. So sometimes I would think, ‘oh I have felt at one with the music, with my instrument and with the audience on several occasions’. Therefore, I know it is

possible in principle, and that gives me confidence to continue performing. In that sense, it influences future flow experiences (3:28).

Piet also states that having experienced flow “makes one a better performer because it gives you something really meaningful to aim for” (4:3). By this, he does not mean that flow becomes his main goal for the performance, but rather that he is “deliberately trying to put in place things” that he knows from previous experience “might result in flow” (4:3). Flow can thus serve as motivation without it being what you aim for.

After a performance where he did not experience flow, Piet says that he feels “regretful” and “frustrated”. He admits that his wife, who is also a violinist, is the only person who can truly identify from an audience’s perspective if he had a flow experience or not. He explains that he copes with the bad experiences by remembering and incorporating advice from a friend.

One should not expect, as a performer, to have big experiences all the time. He said what you should do is try to raise your low experiences. You must try to look at it as a graph. It is unrealistic to expect to have peak experiences all the time and also unrealistic to expect to be raising your peak experiences all the time. What is much more realistic is trying to lift the bottom of your graph, to minimise your really bad experiences on stage. So when I remember that speech he gave me then, I can cope afterwards with my bad performance, and then I think, “Oh well, that is just part of life. It is unfortunate, but hopefully I will do better next time”, and then I try to remind myself to manage my attention on stage properly (4:1).

Elements that inhibit flow

3.2.9 Personal Experiential Theme 9: Allowing too much mind space for disruptive thoughts: “If you pay sufficient attention to the right things, then there is actually no attention space left for disruptive thoughts” (4:2)

Piet explains that he does not perform a lot these days and that this is a factor that inhibits regular flow experiences on stage because there are simply not many opportunities for it to take place.

I know from previous experience that when my frequency of performances passes a certain threshold, my flow experiences on stage are much more often, but when I do not perform often, it feels like one has first to break the ice again (3:4).

Because of his very disciplined and focused attention management, elements such as location do not influence his chances of experiencing flow. Still, he does admit that playing with instruments that are out of tune completely inhibits the opportunity for flow to occur.

Yes, I can't really say that the physical environment actually has much of an influence, except now, of course, in extreme cases... I recently went to play at a nursing home, and there was only a terribly false upright piano, then the "flow experience" does not come so easily (3:7).

He also emphasises the danger of forgetting to manage his attention and thoughts and that this then opens up space in the mind which can be filled with negative, devastating thoughts.

If I forget to manage that, and sometimes I really do forget to manage my attention properly, then I get caught up in negative thoughts and criticise myself. If I'm on stage and not doing well, I get into an internal dialogue of regret and criticism... If I can succeed and remind myself to pay attention from the outset to the critical things, then there is no room because our attention is limited. If you pay sufficient attention to the right things, then there is actually no attention space left for disruptive thoughts. So, if I can remind myself to do that, I am okay on stage (4:2).

3.3 Zanta Hofmeyr's lived flow experiences during music making

(After reading this analysis, Zanta chose not to use a pseudonym as she felt that this was a very accurate summary of her experiences)

Zanta Hofmeyr is one of South Africa's most acclaimed performing violinists and teachers. She has extensive experience in teaching across the country in various universities but currently devotes most of her time to her very busy performance career, practising and preparing for her many upcoming concerts and learning new skills such as playing the organ. She is part of the Wits trio, the "Take Four" quartet and performs regularly as a soloist.

She chose the violin as an instrument because it was technically a great challenge for her and she is a "sucker for a challenge" (1:8). She also finds the violin repertoire and the variety of job opportunities as a violinist appealing and satisfying. Lastly, she chose the violin because she feels that she can relate easily to the instrument as it resembles the human voice so closely.

Zanta has had the privilege of experiencing flow many times and from our inspiring interview the following nine themes emerged:

- **Elements that promote flow**

1. Reflections on flow: "I am a vehicle through which the music has to come. If I stop that flow that feels like a sin against music" (1:57).
2. Experiences during chamber music performance: "Meeting each other in a place where things were possible" (1:20)

3. How emotion, the audience and her physical situation help her to achieve flow: “When you go into the emotions of the music, that helps me to access flow” (1:62).
4. Violin-specific awareness during performance: “Being a string player one needs to always be aware of the intonation” (1:41)
5. The audience’s role in her flow experience: “You know from the audience’s participation and intensity of listening you can tell whether they pick up the flow state or not” (1:47)
6. The advantages of years of experience: “At this point in my life, I experience flow almost all the time” (1:37)
7. Teaching flow: “If there are still too many technical issues to be addressed, I don’t tell them to go into flow” (1:56)
- **Elements that inhibit flow**
8. Internal inhibiting elements: “It boils down to the fear of not being good enough” (1:32)
9. External inhibiting elements: “I don’t know if you can have flow without people around you” (1:55)

Elements that promote flow

3.3.1 Personal Experiential Theme 1: Reflections on flow: “I am a vehicle through which the music has to come. If I stop that flow that feels like a sin against music” (1:57).

When she experiences flow: “Being in the zone where things flow” (1:15)

Zanta describes flow as “being in the zone where things flow” (1:15) without losing her mind’s active role during the flow experience.

I don’t think one can remove the active, rational part of your brain from a performance situation or a flow situation. If you reach the state of flow I think, for me, there is always a part of presence in terms of my technical control, and knowing what I am doing physically, but it diminishes because the flow state takes over and it is as if I listen better to what I am doing in flow and I am more able to let things happen in the moment (1:17).

Flow is thus a fine balance between rational presence and the absence of this balance. Zanta describes flow as not always being in control as opposed to her understanding of mindfulness which is a state where your mind is always actively aware.

Mindfulness, for me, is more conscious consciousness of the moment, of speaking this word now to you, that is mindfulness. If you do mindful walking, for instance, like the Buddhists do, you literally put your foot down, you feel your heel, you feel the roll of your foot, and you feel the heel lift and the other foot taking over, stepping forward. Mindfulness is a very active action, exercise, or state, where your mind is actively

aware, while flow is where you almost let a different awareness take over. Flow feels like something takes over, and you are a hundred percent in control, but you are also not a hundred percent in control (1:60).

Zanta explains her sense of control as a perfect balance of technical effortlessness and intensity.

I am aware of a certain feeling of effortlessness, even though there is a lot of intensity, so it is a strange combination of those two opposing forces actually which are both present. You know, as a violinist there is a lot of intensity involved in playing, but it is as if when I give all that intensity, physically and mentally, and I get into the flow state, it is like a perfect balance that happens. It is almost like that yin-yang sign. Like something that is always fifty of the one and fifty of the other. One is not more than the other (1:50).

During flow, Zanta experiences an array of positive experiences, one of which is that she does not have a strong sense of self. She feels “part of a bigger whole, a whole of things flowing” (1:52). She clarifies it further by using the following analogy:

There is a woman I listen to sometimes and she says, if you are a drop in the ocean, you can think “I am only a small drop in the ocean, this is terrible!”, or you can say “I am a drop in the ocean! I am part of this huge wave, a part of this amazing body of water which is so powerful!” The latter is what I feel like when I am in flow (1:52).

She also emphasizes her increased focus on listening while she plays and that she is more spontaneous and “more able to let things happen in the moment” when she is in flow (1:18). When asked the question of what her perception of time is like during flow, her convincing and clear answer was simply that there is no perception of time. Time does not exist for her during flow.

Zanta admits that performance anxiety can stop the full emanation flow, but also states that sometimes flow can override the performance anxiety. Sometimes she feels the anticipation anxiety of a performance as much as three days before a concert, but then by “trying to allow the freedom to flow through...flow takes over from that anxiety” (1:61). She also feels that the “awareness of flow as a desire for the performance helps one to overcome the anxiety, because it takes your attention away from just being anxious” to the possibility of attaining flow (1:63).

When she does not experience flow: “I worry that I got in the way of the music” (1:57)

When Zanta does not experience flow during a performance she worries that she got in the way of the music.

I am disappointed and I worry that I got into the way of the music - that is what it feels like, and that means that I didn't succeed with my goal. I see myself, as a musician, as an instrument for the music. Me, not my instrument, but me as a player, as an instrument in service of the music. I am a vehicle through which the music has to come. If I stop that flow that feels like a sin against music (1:57).

3.3.2 Personal Experiential Theme 2: Experiences during chamber music performance: “Meeting each other in a place where things were possible” (1:20)

Zanta has had numerous flow experiences during chamber music and finds chamber music to be a very special way to experience flow. She tells a story of a levitating flow experience during a chamber music performance which was the result of the individual musicians meeting “each other in a place where things were possible” (1:20). She had a similar experience with a different group that did not have enough rehearsal time, but despite that they experienced flow during the performance. She said that the shortage of rehearsal time together “didn't impede the performance. It actually didn't harm or damage the performance, because we have such a trust between the four of us. We trusted that even though we didn't have much preparation time, we can rely on each other in the concert to be absolutely connected and react to each other no matter what happened (1:40).

When performing in a chamber music group setting Zanta feels a certain kind of responsibility towards the group which eventually results in favourable conditions for flow.

I don't want to let the group down, you want to play your very best, because you know that would contribute to the ultimate ensemble goal of playing beautifully, so you want to do your part as well as you can. So, that feels like a responsibility (1:45).

Zanta mentions a couple of other factors which also contribute to why their group, Take Four, experiences flow so often.

I must say, especially with this group I just played with, we are all very good friends. There is a great harmony of personalities. There is no stress or tension, and there the flow is almost constant. When we rehearse, when we perform, even when we have lunch it is like everything is in flow (1:38).

She also tells a story of a group flow experience she had in an orchestra once, where they experienced flow due to the deep emotional understanding of the piece thanks to a very

capable conductor. He explained the feeling and understanding of the music to them in such a way that it went deep into their hearts (1:58).

Elements that promote flow

3.3.3 Personal Experiential Theme 3: How emotion, the audience and her physical situation help her to achieve flow: “When you go into the emotions of the music, that helps me to access flow” (1:62).

Having a good physical situation, health and good emotional space: “A good emotional space helps, you know” (1:27)

Regarding external influences that influence her flow Zanta explains “It is much easier to get in flow if you are in a good physical situation. A good concert hall with a nice acoustic helps. A good piano helps. If you know the pianist is able to do what he/she wants to. I think if there is good health amongst me and my colleagues, if there is good physical health it helps, to feel strong, to feel happy. A good emotional space helps, you know. If you worried about something that’s wrong somewhere in your family or so, then it is difficult to separate your thoughts from that” (1:27). Auditory influences are very strong for Zanta, which means that location is not a major influence on her flow if the auditory requirements are satisfactory.

Having an audience to share flow with: “I think that is also why it is possible to be in flow, because you are sharing it” (1:54)

Zanta also feels that flow is not only for her enjoyment. She believes that experiencing flow is only possible because we can share it. She thus needs an audience in order to achieve flow. Zanta further elaborates by saying “it is easier to perform in front of an audience of people who are not too knowledgeable, seemingly. You don’t know how knowledgeable they are, so to perceive them to be simply so happy to listen to you, is much easier, then you are free” (1:34). This freedom helps and encourages her to “try to remove” herself and her ego from the picture.

In order for my thoughts about myself, and my consciousness of myself versus other people or colleagues to not disrupt the process of inspiration that I believe must flow through me, I remove myself from the picture so that the music can come through me and reach the audience in the purest way (1:14).

Going into the emotion of the music: “When you go into the emotions of the music, that helps me access flow” (1:62)

Another factor that helps her achieve flow, and is one of the main gateways to flow for her, is the “depth and the beauty” of the music. She emphasizes this by stating that “when you go into the emotions of the music, that helps me to access flow” (1:62). Zanta has a very active and busy

performance career. She states that this means that she has to “practise a lot to be prepared for all of these pieces and concerts” (1:5). Without sufficient skill, flow is not possible. Zanta’s goal for the performance “is to be in flow” (1:46). She has a unique ritual before she walks on stage to try and help her achieve this.

Before I walk on stage I have a moment where I imagine my head opening up for inspiration to flow through me (1:13).

3.3.4 Personal Experiential Theme 4: Violin specific action awareness during performance: “Being a string player one needs to always be aware of the intonation” (1:41)

There are three main violin-specific points of focus that Zanta is aware of during a performance. The first is intonation. Zanta says “being a string player one needs to always be aware of intonation. That is a factor that keeps my feet on the ground. You constantly have to listen and gauge and make sure you are in tune with the others and with your instrument” (1:41). The second awareness is a relaxed left hand and not getting “cramped up” (1:42), and the third is being “very much aware of the bow making proper contact with the string and getting the sound” that she desires (1:43).

3.3.5 Personal Experiential Theme 5: The audience’s role in her flow experience: “You know from the audience’s participation and intensity of listening you can tell whether they pick up the flow state or not” (1:47)

When in flow during a performance, Zanta finds a certain kind of reassurance from the audience’s reaction.

I can read the audience. You know from the audience’s participation and intensity of listening you can tell whether they pick up the flow state or not. So, I knew that it was successful because after a movement you can hear the sound of an audience member who blows out their breath after I finished a piece. You hear how people have a breath out when you finish your piece. I hear that acutely. Sometimes I just glance over their faces, and I can see their expressions on their faces and you can tell a lot from that. I don’t focus on that, because I don’t want to be brought too much into that, because that could break my flow. It is a fine line between how aware you are of your audience and how much you stay in flow (1:47).

3.3.6 Personal Experiential Theme 6: The advantages of years of experience: “At this point in my life, I experience flow almost all the time” (1:37)

Zanta has the wonderful privilege of being able to say “at this point in my life, I experience flow almost all the time” (1:37). She has been in the profession for over 40 years and can confidently say that she knows herself on stage. She describes this as “a certain feeling of self-confidence” that she has “built up because of experience” (1:25).

3.3.7 Personal Experiential Theme 7: Teaching flow: “If there are still too many technical issues to be addressed, I don’t tell them to go into flow” (1:56)

For Zanta, teaching flow to students depends on their performance level. If they are not quite on a performance level and “if there are still too many technical issues still to be addressed” (1:56) she would rather encourage them to focus on physical demands of playing the violin that may create the possibility for flow to occur, for example, to “concentrate on the bow, the feel of your bow on the string, or just constantly feel whether the left hand is relaxed” (1:56).

Elements that inhibit flow

3.3.8 Personal Experiential Theme 8: Internal inhibiting elements: “It boils down to the fear of not being good enough” (1:32)

Intimidation from an audience member: “I was threatened by the presence of the other violinist so my sense of self-consciousness was overpowering and overwhelming” (1:51)

During our interview, Zanta told a story of a performance where there was a very dear but excellent violinist colleague in the audience. Despite knowing the programme inside and out, she “suddenly felt nervous”. These nerves along with the feeling of intimidation, activated her critical self, which robbed her from experiencing flow that day.

I was threatened by the presence of the other violinist so my sense of self-consciousness was overpowering and overwhelming. It was too much. It was terrible (1:51). I started listening to myself as if I am a critical listener of my own playing. So, I was not in it anymore; I was observing myself, and it stopped my flow. I was constantly thinking, “I hope this is sounding good. I wonder what she thinks of this or that”. It was absolutely a nightmare for me to experience that (1:30). So, it was my critical self that was aware because of my fear of respected colleagues’ criticism of me (1:31).

By reflecting on this incident, Zanta came to the conclusion that “it boils down to the fear of not being good enough. That is the underlying fear. Am I good enough tonight?” (1:32).

Lack of preparation: “If there is anything that you are worried about technically, it prevents flow from happening” (1:19)

Zanta believes that “it is only possible to attain a flow experience or state if you have done excessive work in preparation” and that this is “the only way to become free enough to enter a flow state. If there is anything that you are worried about technically, it prevents flow from happening” (1:19). Thus, when Zanta is preparing for a concert, she very seldom experiences flow in the practice room because there she focuses all her attention to the technical requirements, to such an extent that she cannot have the freedom to experience flow.

I find in rehearsal, I pay much more attention to the what, the how, and the why. What am I doing? How do I want this to sound? I am much more intellectually, rationally and emotionally involved with what I want to achieve on stage because it is a process of preparation (1:22).

3.3.9 Personal Experiential Theme 9: External inhibiting elements: “I don’t know if you can have flow without people around you” (1:55)

Zanta admits the external elements such as bad weather influence her flow experiences negatively.

Even weather can be a problem. If it is too humid, too dry, if you are struggling with your instrument, or if it is too cold, these physical circumstances can negatively influence flow (1:35).

Zanta also feels that she cannot achieve flow alone. She has to share it. Thus, the absence of an audience is an element that inhibits her flow.

I don’t know if you can have flow without people around you. I think you need an audience. I have never thought about this before. Good question! I don’t think I can achieve flow on my own in the room, no (1:55).

3.4 Vladimir’s lived flow experiences during music performance

(The participant chose to remain anonymous and therefore chose a pseudonym)

Vladimir is a violinist who performs and teaches in South Africa. Although he was not born in South Africa, he has lived here most of his life and actively contributes a tremendous amount to the development of classical music in South Africa on both a performing and teaching level. Vladimir regularly plays in chamber ensembles and often assumes leadership positions in various orchestras around the country. He performs because he “enjoys playing for people, and to make their day a little bit better” (1:8). Vladimir teaches many students, ranging from young ages to tertiary level. He says that when he was younger, his main motivation for playing the

violin was ultimately to see how well he could play. Now, however, the focus is more on his students and what he can teach them. He derives motivation from their progress and seeing how their love and appreciation for music grows. Vladimir states that he is able to experience flow through his students and that he remembers more of his students' best moments than his own. He does, however, "sometimes" (1:11) experience flow during his own performances and feels that he is truly in flow when he plays "a slow movement and you can hear a pin drop" (1:16). When the audiences are involved and react by being "really quiet" (1:16) he is assured that he has reached the flow state.

From our interview, the following eight themes emerged from the analysis of Vladimir's interview data:

- **Elements that inhibit flow**

1. Different ideas between colleagues inhibit his flow: "If you don't really believe the same as the other people, it is difficult to get to the point where you really can let go and enjoy playing" (1:14)
2. Uncontrollable elements that inhibit his flow: "I can still do my best, but it is not going to let the group sound amazing if everyone is not on the same page musically" (1:25)

- **Elements that promote flow**

3. Mental and physical preparation that promotes flow: "I will do my best and then I can be at peace when I perform, because there is nothing else I could have done" (1:10)
4. Performance goals that promote flow: "My goal is always to inspire people, to give them a message, or to tell a story" (1:41)
5. Positive mindset on stage during a performance that promotes flow: "I think a lot of it is what you make of it" (1:24)
6. How regular change and the reaction of the audience promote his flow: "How the audience reacts has a positive influence on me" (1:26)
7. Flow inspires and motivates him: "You are always striving for the same feeling again" (1:32)

- **Teaching flow**

8. Ways in which he teaches flow indirectly: "I do not tell them about the flow theory (1:50)

Elements that inhibit flow

3.4.1 Personal Experiential Theme 1: Different ideas between colleagues inhibit his flow: “If you don’t really believe the same as the other people, it is difficult to get to the point where you really can let go and enjoy playing” (1:14)

When Vladimir plays and performs, it is mostly in smaller ensembles. He explains that, sadly enough, this is the setting where he experiences flow the least because of clashing personalities and the circumstances in which he has to work. He emphasises that he thinks and believes differently from other musicians with whom he works regularly and disagrees with them on many things. Unfortunately, he has also given up trying to change the group dynamic as it proved to be a hopeless case, and this makes it especially difficult for him to experience flow during these performances.

3.4.2 Personal Experiential Theme 2: Uncontrollable elements that inhibit flow: “I can still do my best, but it is not going to let the group sound amazing if everyone is not on the same page musically” (1:25)

Vladimir says that your fellow musicians’ preparation plays a very big role in your ability to experience flow. He says that when musicians show up to a rehearsal and are not prepared or are even simply having an off day, it is very difficult to experience flow. Other physical elements such as uncomfortable clothes and awkward bowings can also inhibit flow experiences. Regarding the choice of clothing while performing, Vladimir emphasises that it is very important “that everything fits and that you feel comfortable”, because if not, it can be very distracting and have bad consequences.

I had an experience where I wore something that wasn’t comfortable. I was still in high school, and I had a memory lapse because I was thinking about what I was wearing” (1:36).

Another distracting element is the feeling of not being in control of the choice of bowings when playing in larger ensembles. Vladimir tells the story of an incident where he was playing in an orchestra, and he had no other option than to play the bowings that were given to him, which he did not agree with at all. He explains that this was a big mental challenge for him as he was very inclined to have a negative attitude because of the bowings, but he had to work very hard to remain positive and professional despite this.

Elements that promote flow

3.4.3 Personal Experiential Theme 3: Mental and physical preparation that promotes flow: “I will do my best and then I can be at peace when I perform, because there is nothing else I could have done” (1:10)

In our interview,, Vladimir recalled all of the many kinds of preparations he makes as a performer before getting on stage. These preparations are of both a physical and mental nature. On a physical level, Vladimir believes that physical practising is the most important preparation he can do before a concert.

I know that if I practice, there is nothing else I can do. (1:10)

When he feels that his practising is sufficient and he is in good shape, then “when you pick up your instrument, you can just play. It feels like your fingers flow into the grooves and the motion, and everything is working” (1:23). He also prioritises working out the technical requirements such as bowings and fingerings beforehand so that he feels in control on stage, and he tries to have many preparation recitals before the actual concert. He also encourages his students to apply this approach of performing as many times as possible before a performance.

On the day of the performance, Vladimir always arrives at least an hour early to prepare mentally and physically.

I always arrive more than an hour early, so that I have a few minutes in the hall by myself and I can play a few notes. Then I can calm myself down and by the time the concert starts I have gotten through my “freak out” moment and I can calm down and enjoy it” (1:38).

During this time Vladimir also does some breathing exercises to help him calm down. He emphasizes that he likes being comfortable when he plays and for that reason he tries to “minimise any outside things that can happen” (1:58).

On a mental level Vladimir prepares by visualising the whole performance experience beforehand, everything from where he gets dressed to the applause afterwards. He also does a lot of reading and research on the music he is playing in order “to find something special about it” and connect with it and then “hopefully present it in a way that people would like to hear” (1:34). Vladimir emphasises that liking the music he plays helps him a lot to play successful concerts.

Regarding bad performance experiences, Vladimir explains that he believes “it is also important to have experiences like that where you mess up and you can go on” (1:37). They serve as motivation to “try harder the next day or the next time” (1:54), but he tries to put such

experiences behind him. He says that it is important to learn from them, but even more important not to hold on to them.

3.4.4 Personal Experiential Theme 4: Performance goals that promote flow: “My goal is always to inspire people, to give them a message, or to tell a story” (1:41).

Vladimir says that the moments he cherishes and remembers the most are those of slow movements where he manages to tell a story. “To me it is almost a goal, to really tell a story with a slow piece that is not flashy” (1:18). He explains that he “really tries to make it an experience for the people who came to listen” (1:49) and “anywhere you play, you want to touch people” (1:31).

I remember I played in a little church once. I played four or five recitals in two weeks but different music. It was crazy, but I was so young. I played a second movement of a Beethoven Sonata and I think I made myself cry, but you know when people come to you, it is easy to make people love something very fast and flashy but I think it is very difficult to get into people's hearts with slow movements (1:17).

Another goal Vladimir has is to focus on the performance at hand. He explains that he struggles to recall a specifically memorable performance from years ago because he believes that he focuses more on the one he has at hand, and he tries to make that the best one.

I think my intention is just to do the best I can (1:9).

He also says that he tries to avoid getting into a rut so he constantly plays new music in new places. Taking on leadership roles in an orchestra also provides him with great joy and results in his whole experience being much happier.

3.4.5 Personal Experiential Theme 5: Positive mindset on stage during a performance that promotes flow: “I think a lot of it is what you make of it” (1:24).

In our interview Vladimir stated that he gets performance anxiety and that he manages it with breathing exercises. He also does not think about technical challenges during a performance, but rather tries to “let go” (1:40).

I read a book called The Inner Game of Music in my first year and I really have lived my whole life by that thing. I don't have an inner dialogue going “oh crap”. I have trained myself not to rush when there is something difficult coming up, or not to freak out, or to breathe. I will have in my music words that say “slow” or “easy” or “chill”, stuff like that, so I don't think about technical stuff when I perform (1:40).

Vladimir also adds value to this statement by explaining that he tries to “be in the music” (1:43) while he performs, rather than thinking about technicalities. A mindset that helps him to be in the music is to play for his grandmother.

She is not here anymore, but I always tell my students to think of someone who they really like and who would never judge them, and then play for them (1:27).

Vladimir states that when he is “calm it is easy to get to flow, but if you are stressed and have voices in your head, and thinking about other things, then I don’t know if you can experience flow” (1:57).

To achieve group flow, Vladimir believes that you have to “work well with the people you play with” (1:21); they need to respect you and they need to listen to you. He recalled an incident with some old work colleagues where he experienced flow because there was mutual respect.

I went somewhere else and played with old work colleagues and that might not have sounded so great. Everyone did not keep on growing so much, but even if it is not perfect, sometimes it is just so great to play with the people you know will respect you. Then the results are awesome to me, the performances are awesome, then everything about that experience is great, even if it is not perfect. For me it doesn't have to be perfect to get to flow (1:22).

Vladimir explains that he cannot always control his work environment, but he can control his mindset and if he knows that he did his best, he can still experience flow despite not experiencing mutual respect in his work environment.

I also think a lot of it is what you make of it, so if I go in with an attitude of “I don't like the people” and “I don't agree with them” I will never be happy. Sometimes I just have to, but sometimes I have to rise above that and just get over that and then do my best and then I can still feel great about how I play, and even if someone else messes up more than I do, I can still experience flow just because I know I did my best and I played very well and people said “you sounded very good” (1:24).

3.4.6 Personal Experiential Theme 6: How regular change and the reaction of the audience promote his flow: “How the audience reacts has a positive influence on me” (1:26)

Vladimir excitedly admits that he loves leading sections in the orchestra and that he experiences flow the most in this setting. He also states that he feeds off change. He does not like doing the same thing for too long. He also feels that his flow experience is promoted or intensified by the reaction of the audience.

He does not feel that a physical setting can inhibit his flow, if the sound production is what he was looking for.

A couple of months ago I played in a concert outside, and it was really cold but I still had a lot of fun. It was outside in the field, so it was still nice, still an opportunity. I feel like a different person when I start playing. If everything works, it's just great, especially if the sound that comes out is what I was maybe always looking for when I practice (1:28).

3.4.7 Personal Experiential Theme 7: Flow inspires and motivates him: “You are always striving for the same feeling again” (1:32)

Vladimir states that he feeds off the feeling of experiencing flow: “If it is going well, I want to play even better” (1:42). He also believes that having experienced flow assists in experiencing it again, “because you are always striving for that same feeling again” (1:32). He is of the view that it is pointless to try again if you do not strive towards experiencing flow again. Having experienced flow also serves as a motivation to practise and perform again for him. He explains that he practices long hours away from his family and friends, which is a big sacrifice for him. Yet he continues doing it, and he believes that the possibility of experiencing flow might be the inspiration for trying to aim for flow again.

Teaching flow

3.4.8 Personal Experiential Theme 8: Ways in which he teaches flow indirectly: “I do not tell them about the flow theory” (1:50)

Vladimir admits that he does not inform his students about flow theory, but he rather teaches them techniques that are necessary to achieve flow.

I also teach my students to think through the whole thing, what you are going to wear, what you are going to do on that day, who's going to be there, imagining the examiners, imagining walking in before the time, while you are playing and the applause at the end, and then you are fine. When you are going through that it becomes easier (1:39).

He also says that he does not really inform anyone of his flow experiences except for his students, because he feels that they can use and benefit from the information.

3.5 Miro Chakaryan's lived flow experiences during music performance

(The participant chose to use his own name as he is proud to share his flow experiences.)

Miro is one of South Africa's most talented and famous violinists. He has been an outstanding concertmaster of the Johannesburg Philharmonic Orchestra for 23 years. He has taught students who have reached international success. Furthermore, he is a very active chamber musician and recording artist. He is greatly respected among colleagues and students. As a child, Miro started playing the violin as it was his parents' wish. It was not until many years later when he met a friend in a music school that he developed a real interest and love for the instrument. He and his friend "found the recordings of the great masters" (1:7) like Itzhak Perlman. They viewed these recordings as precious treasures and listened to them repeatedly and for days discussed every small detail. They also tried to imitate these recordings. This curiosity and amazement were the real start of Miro's life as a musician and he has "never looked back after that" (1:7).

From our long and extensive interview consisting of deep and rich stories, the following eight themes emerged from the analysis of Miro's interview data:

- **Elements that promote flow**

1. His personal interpretation of flow: "You can theorise as much as you want until you start experiencing it, and then you start making your own theories" (1:13)
2. Acting as messengers of the music: "At the end of the day how well we do this and how well we can touch them with that reading, that is our goal" (1:12)
3. Benefits of controlling your thoughts on stage: "It takes exactly the same amount to make yourself happy and unhappy. The same amount of energy and wish and will to make yourself happy and unhappy, so choose what you want to make yourself" (1:27)
4. Being reassured that he experiences flow by others' reactions: "This type of flow which went through the whole audience and everything, and you feel that's that. Nothing can ever be better" (1:22)
5. The importance of past experiences: "How you are going to react in that moment is entirely based on your past experiences" (1:38)
6. Ways in which he achieves flow: "You can only achieve that high if you, yourself as a person, are prepared to climb that high" (1:18)
7. Teaching flow: "The intention is only to master the instrument as a youngster" (1:8)

- **Elements that inhibit flow**

8. Negative thoughts can inhibit flow: "What affects me is my thoughts, how well I prepare my thoughts" (1:34)

Elements that promote flow

3.5.1 Personal Experiential Theme 1: His personal interpretation of flow: “You can theorise as much as you want until you start experiencing it, and then you start making your own theories” (1:13)

Miro is in the privileged position to have experienced flow many times and has come to create his own personal interpretation of flow, which he describes as the point when “you are reaching your highest possible vibration of yourself and of what you are as a person” (1:15). Miro believes that “everyone finds their flow experiences for themselves, depending on the factors surrounding them” (1:57). He also recognizes that it is important to appreciate yourself, by saying that appreciation and recognition from the audience are great but “own appreciation to yourself at that moment is the most important” (1:44).

When in flow, Miro feels relaxed. This causes his body, hands, fingers and muscles to have good coordination, and “if that has happened, things are happening. The most important is to feel relaxed” (1:46). This relaxation also positively influences his consciousness of self and gives him the feeling of being “on top of the world” (1:49). During flow he also feels like time does not exist.

Time doesn't exist. For me... It is a very irrelevant factor in that sense because time doesn't exist. Who knows what time is? We have watches, we have dates, and we know that in a way it is our life, but when you are in that moment, there is no time. You are out of time in that sense. You are not thinking of time. Time does not exist. Time only exists when you are rushing from somewhere to somewhere, but with music and art in which we are messengers, time does not exist (1:50).

3.5.2 Personal Experiential Theme 2: Acting as messengers of the music: “At the end of the day how well we do this and how well we can touch them with that reading, that is our goal” (1:12)

Over the years of practising and performing Miro has gained a lot of experience and knowledge and he believes that when on stage, a musician has a very clear goal, and that is to be a messenger of the music.

Now when you gain a little bit more experience you start asking yourself the question...why am I doing this? What for? Now, after fifty years of experience with that instrument in my hand, I found one very simple truth: that we are simply messengers. We study all our lives to be messengers between what is on the paper or the music which is given, and to pass it to the audience. Our goal is to be that messenger (1:9).

Miro explains that most people can read books for themselves, but very few people can read sheet music, and that is where the job of a musician comes in – to show people the meaning of the music which they cannot read or understand.

Having this goal to be a messenger also inspires him to improve his technique in order to give a good rendition of the composer's intentions of the music.

So that's why we master the technique, so we can read what is on that paper and show it to them and at the end of the day how well we do this and how well we can touch them with that reading, that is our goal (1:12).

He explains that he feels a range of good emotions when performing; for example, he is very satisfied with his technical abilities to be able to pass along the message to the audience, he is delighted by the wonderful music he is playing, he feels that he is "in a wonderful state of mind" (1:51). Being able to perform and to pass the message to the audience supplies him with "great satisfaction" (1:51), but at the same time he is careful of making the message too much about himself. He explains that in the end we are the composer's messenger, and not our own, thus we must be cautious of our role, and not make it too much about ourselves.

3.5.3 Personal Experiential Theme 3: Benefits of controlling your thoughts on stage: "It takes exactly the same amount to make yourself happy and unhappy. The same amount of energy and wish and will to make yourself happy and unhappy, so choose what you want to make yourself" (1:27)

Miro attaches great value to the power of thought. He explains by saying that musicians spend hours in the practice room, preparing for that one moment where you walk on stage while thousands of people are watching you and you have one single chance to be your best self. It is a very stressful situation with an immense amount of tension, and Miro believes that for this situation to be successful, you have to be very strong psychologically. "Everything that you have been putting in your subconscious in the practice room now has to come out. That's the moment" (1:31). Miro also claims that external factors such as people coughing or noises have never affected him, but rather his own thoughts can have an impact. He says that sometimes we are creating negative thoughts ourselves by asking questions like "Am I good enough?", but "the moment when you overcome this mindset for yourself, then you create the foundation for the flood of inspiration from there" (1:60) and "when your state of mind is right, all the experience...comes out and sometimes you can even experiment with things" (1:48). To be able to achieve these pleasures, Miro emphasizes that he has to apply mental techniques to make himself relax, and also practise his highest form of concentration.

You can reach a higher vibration only if you are training your mental discipline in that way. That will affect your performance a lot as well. That is how you can clean all these negative thoughts which are coming in. If you are mentally strong enough, wonderful things will happen in your life (1:35).

3.5.4 Personal Experiential Theme 4: Being reassured that he experiences flow by others' reaction: "This type of flow which went through the whole audience and everything, and you feel that's that. Nothing can ever be better" (1:22)

Miro attaches great value to the audience's reaction during his flow experiences and finds it exhilarating when he notices that the audience is in flow with him. He believes that this happens when you as a musician and messenger are doing a good job in passing on the message. He explains this by saying that sometimes when on stage he notices that the audience is restless and he hears noises or candy wrappers opening, and he realised that it is because he is not concentrating on conveying a message to the audience.

It's not passing on. My message. Why is it not passing on? Because I'm not in a message (1:53).

When he manages and feels satisfied with how he conveys the message, he feels like the musicians, conductor and audience are all involved and feel the flow.

This type of flow which went through the whole audience and everything, and you feel that's that. Nothing can ever be better (1:22).

3.5.5 Personal Experiential Theme 5: The importance of past experiences: "How you are going to react in that moment is entirely based on your past experiences" (1:38)

Miro confesses that it is normal for a professional musician to have days where it is difficult to experience flow and he admits that he "cannot do it all the time" (1:59), but when he is in such a situation, he always tries to "remember what happened" (1:59) when he experienced it. When he remembers that, he thinks "that's worth trying again and again and again" (1:59). He also explains that a performing musician has one chance to make a success out of a performance, and how one reacts in that moment is very much based on one's past experiences.

How you are going to react in that moment is entirely based on your past experiences. If you have a lot of experience, if you have had failures, if you have great moments, all of this is in your mind because the subconscious of people is a computer which never forgets anything. Whatever you realise in your life is there forever. Maybe you forget that or maybe you don't know it, maybe you forgot what happened 20 years ago, but your subconscious never sleeps and is always there. The more experience you have in

there and the more information you have in (I'm calling it the hard drive) the back of your head - the information you have when the moment comes on stage or wherever and you are able to pull it out and pop out and say "OK, mirror, you remember that?" and you are saying "Gosh, how did I know that, how do I know that?" I know it because it's been there, but you forgot it's been there, but in a moment when it has to come out, it comes out (1:38).

As mentioned before, Miro has developed his own interpretation of flow over the years, and he explains that one can only do this when one understands the meaning of life and the meaning of your playing.

There are many theories, but as long as you understand for yourself the meaning of life and the meaning of your playing, and what your role is.... When you understand that, then you can reach your high (1:20).

As one ages, and repeats certain programmes or pieces, "you learn a lot from yourself" (1:17). Technical demands are fewer than when you were a beginner, or when you played the piece for the first time and this leaves space for a "higher understanding" (1:17) of the musical meaning.

3.5.6 Personal Experiential Theme 6: Ways in which he achieves flow: "You can only achieve that high if you, yourself as a person, are prepared to climb that high" (1:18).

Miro says that he has experienced flow many times, and that he has been searching all his life for "how to experience it again" (1:21). He asks himself the question of how you reach that type of energy which flows through you during flow, and with time and experience he has come to discover the answer, which he believes is "with a lot of hard work and a lot of experience" (1:23). When telling the story of a previous flow experience, which he describes as a "celebration" (1:25), he emphasises that the success was due to hard work.

It was the same thing, we put so much work into that (1:25).

Miro also tells the story of a flow experience during a recording session. He says that he felt a "type of power" (1:26) coming, but only because of their hard work.

We built that. It didn't just come like that because we wanted it to. If we didn't build, how long, nearly a year of lockdown before we played it, it wouldn't come. Energy never comes like that. You have to build it (1:26).

To add to his preparation he also uses the time in the practice room to "create" (1:28) his performance. In the practice room he figures out what he will be thinking on stage, what he will have to do on stage and how he will manage that technically. When the performance then

starts, he already knows how he will feel in the moment. Miro also says that when he feels steady and grounded on stage he knows it will go well.

He also finds the words of violinist Itzhak Perlman inspiring when asked how he retains his interest when having to play the Brahms violin concerto for the hundredth time – he said that he always finds different things and learns something new. This also helps and inspires him in the upkeep of his technical abilities, to which he is very committed because if he is not, his chances of achieving flow become less.

Miro articulates the power of the mind when on stage and the role the mind has during flow by saying that the mind is the first to achieve flow and then your body physically matches it. Miro believes that for the mind to reach such a high state, you have to spiritually believe very strongly in something. If you work very hard, you might be able to reach that level of consciousness associated with spirituality.

3.5.7 Personal Experiential Theme 7: Teaching flow: “The intention is only to master the instrument as a youngster” (1:8)

Miro does not teach his students about flow theory. He believes that the intention for a student is “only to master the instrument” (1:8). He quotes his childhood professor by saying that “students are students to learn” (1:54). The first thing you have to learn is technique and “the ability to control your instrument” (1:54). So he teaches his students the best possible violin techniques in order to control their instrument, and he believes that as their minds and experiences grow, they will form their own interpretation of flow.

Elements that inhibit flow

3.5.8 Personal Experiential Theme 8: Negative thoughts can inhibit flow: “What affects me is my thoughts, how well I prepare my thoughts” (1:34)

Miro describes only two elements that inhibit his flow experiences and they are the thoughts of doubts that he creates in his own head, and being intimidated by someone in the audience. At the time of the interview Miro was preparing for an upcoming concert in his childhood hometown. The town was incredibly excited about his performance and advertised it on the radio and in newspapers. Miro would also perform for his loved ones for the first time in many years. Despite having many reasons to feel appreciated and excited to play, Miro felt nervous, because he was scared that he would not fulfil their expectations. When asked how he is

dealing with these nerves, he answered that he is trying to “kill that thinking” (1:32). Instead he thinks of previous flow experiences he has had on stage and tries to chase that feeling. Another incident was when Miro noticed someone in the audience during a concert who was intimidating for him. This caused some nerves, but also served as a form of inspiration. He asked himself questions like “are you going to be a star, or are you going to collapse with a big bang?” (1:42). Luckily for him the inspiration overtook the nerves in this particular performance because of his strong mind and was he able to experience a memorable flow experience during this concert.

3.6 Cross-case analysis

Key:

CAPITAL LETTERS = Group Experiential Themes (GET)

Bold = Personal Experiential Themes (PET)

Italic = Sub-themes

Normal = quote from interview

Table 1: Cross-case analysis

GET	Piet's PET	Zanta's PET	Miro's PET	Vladimir's PET	Mary's PET
PRACTISING IS ESSENTIAL	Preparation: "If I do not feel sufficiently prepared, Then the flow experience is basically impossible" (3:14) Not making flow the main goal: "If you strive for happiness all the time, you will probably not reach it (3:53)	Teaching flow: "If there are still too many technical issues to be addressed, I don't tell them to go into flow" (1:56) Internal inhibiting elements — Lack of preparation: "If there is anything that you are worried about	Teaching flow: "The intention is only to master the instrument as a youngster" (1:8) Ways in which he achieves flow: "You can only achieve that high if you yourself as a person are prepared to climb that high" (1:18)	Ways in which he teaches flow indirectly: "I do not tell them about the flow theory" (1:32) Mental and physical preparation that promotes flow: "I will do my best and then I can be	The conditions of flow that were present during her performance — Having a good challenge-skill balance: "I had a lot of practice time and many lessons..., so technically I was very well prepared" (2:105) Teaching flow by creating opportunities for flow to occur: "Relax and think of

GET	Piet's PET	Zanta's PET	Miro's PET	Vladimir's PET	Mary's PET
		technically, it prevents flow from happening" (1:19)		at peace when I perform because there is nothing else I could have done" (1:10)	nothing other than enjoying the moment" (2:125)
AWARENESS AND MANAGING THOUGHTS AND ATTENTION	Listening: "Without exception, listening is my gateway to flow" (3:25) Attention management — <i>Focussing on sensory perception:</i> "When I feel I am a bit out of it and not really in the moment, it helps to focus on the feeling of my fingers and what my bow is doing" (3:21) (Not) allowing too much mind space for disruptive thoughts: "If you pay sufficient attention to the right things, then there is actually no	Violin-specific awareness during performance: "Being a string player, I need to always be aware of the intonation" (1:41) How emotion, the audience and her physical situation help her to achieve flow — <i>Having a good physical situation, health and good emotional</i>	Benefits of controlling your thoughts on stage: "It takes exactly the same amount to make yourself happy and unhappy. The same amount of energy and wish and will to make yourself happy and unhappy, so choose what you want to make yourself" (1:27) Negative thoughts can inhibit flow:	Positive mindset on stage during a performance that promotes flow: "I think a lot of it is what you make of it" (1:24)	Being present: "The feeling of being totally focused and consumed in the moment" (2:97) Facilitating flow experiences — <i>Being aware of her sensory experiences:</i> "The smell of wood and heavy, dusty curtains greeted me" (2:29)

GET	Piet's PET	Zanta's PET	Miro's PET	Vladimir's PET	Mary's PET
	attention space left for disruptive thoughts" (4:3)	<i>space</i>: "A good emotional space helps, you know" (1:27) Internal inhibiting elements — <i>Intimidation from an audience member</i>: "I was threatened by the presence of the other violinist so my sense of self-consciousness was overpowering and overwhelming" (1:51)	"What affects me is my thoughts, how well I prepare my thoughts" (1:34)		
EMOTION, INTENTION AND THE MESSAGE OF THE MUSIC	Attention management — <i>Thinking musically</i> : "A very big part of my attention goes to the meaning and the flow of the music" (3:41)	How emotion, the audience and her physical situation help her to achieve flow — <i>Going into</i>	Acting as messengers of the music : "At the end of the day how well we do this and how	Performance goals that promote flow : "My goal is always to inspire	The conditions of flow that were present during her performance — <i>Experiencing a loss of self-consciousness</i> : "I

GET	Piet's PET	Zanta's PET	Miro's PET	Vladimir's PET	Mary's PET
		<i>the emotion of the music:</i> "When you go into the emotions of the music, that helps me to access flow" (1:62)	well we can touch them with that reading, that is our goal" (1:12)	people, to give them a message or to tell a story" (1:41)	was not at all self-conscious in terms of the audience" (2:119) Facilitating flow experiences — <i>Focusing on expressing her emotions:</i> "I love the experience of feeling emotions more powerfully when I play" (2:10) Facilitating flow experiences — <i>Having a clear intention:</i> "My main goal for all my performances is to be a disciple" (2:136)
INTERACTIVE MUSICAL RELATIONSHIPS	Chamber music: "You are combining with another musical personality and that is just amazing to me" (3:49)	Experiences during chamber music performance: "Meeting each other in a place where		Different ideas between colleagues inhibit his flow: "If you don't really believe the same as the other	Facilitating flow experiences — <i>Positive interactive relationships between colleagues on stage, and between performer and audience:</i> "I am sharing my feelings, or the composer's

GET	Piet's PET	Zanta's PET	Miro's PET	Vladimir's PET	Mary's PET
		things were possible" (1:20)		people, it is difficult to get to the point where you really can let go and enjoy playing" (1:14) Uncontrollable elements that inhibit flow: "I can still do my best, but it is not going to let the group sound amazing if everyone is not on the same page musically" (1:25)	feelings, and emotions with the audience" (2:80)
AUDIENCE'S ROLE IN THE PERFORMER'S	The audience: "When you experience that the audience is with you, that they are a part of the musical experience and	The audience's role in her flow experience: "You know from the	Being reassured that he experiences flow by others' reactions: "This type	How regular change and the reaction of the audience	The conditions of flow that were present during her performance — <i>Receiving immediate feedback from</i>

GET	Piet's PET	Zanta's PET	Miro's PET	Vladimir's PET	Mary's PET
FLOW EXPERIENCES	completely involved, and part of the flow, that helps to achieve flow" (3:10)	audience's participation and intensity of listening... whether they pick up the flow state or not" (1:47) How emotion, the audience and her physical situation help her to achieve flow — <i>Having an audience to share flow with:</i> "I think that is also why it is possible to be in flow, because you are sharing it" (1:54) External inhibiting elements: "I don't know if you can	of flow which went through the whole audience and everything and you feel that's that. Nothing can ever be better" (1:22)	promotes his flow: "How the audience reacts has a positive influence on me" (1:26)	<i>herself and the audience:</i> "I receive energy from the audience" (2:78)

GET	Piet's PET	Zanta's PET	Miro's PET	Vladimir's PET	Mary's PET
		have flow without people around you" (1:55)			
THE INFLUENCE OF PAST EXPERIENCES		The advantages of years of experience: "At this point in my life, I experience flow almost all the time" (1:37)	The importance of past experiences: "How you are going to react in that moment is entirely based on your past experiences" (1:38)		Constant comparison, intimidation, performance anxiety and negative attitudes: "I compare all my performances to that one particular vivid flow experience and if I did not experience flow as intensely as that one time, I am not as excited all fulfilled as I should be" (2:96)
UNIQUE INTERPRETATIONS OF FLOW	The nature of flow experiences: "It just feels exactly right" (4:6)	Reflections on flow — <i>When she experiences flow:</i> "Being in the zone where things flow" (1:15)	His personal interpretation of flow: "You can theorise as much as you want until you start experiencing it, and then you start making your own theories" (1:13)		

GET	Piet's PET	Zanta's PET	Miro's PET	Vladimir's PET	Mary's PET
THE OUTCOMES OF HAVING EXPERIENCED OR NOT EXPERIENCED FLOW	Outcomes of flow experiences and not having experienced them: Having experienced flow "Makes him a better performer because it gives you something really meaningful to aim for" (4:3)	Reflections on flow — <i>When she does not experience flow:</i> "I worry that I got in the way of the music" (1:57)		Flow inspires and motivates him: "You are always striving for that same feeling again" (1:32)	Facilitating flow experiences — <i>Having a feeling of worthiness:</i> "The moment just consumed me completely – as if it had accepted me" (2:49) My identity: "I found my voice as performer" (2:53)

During the cross-case analysis, the following eight group experiential themes emerged from the five participants' data:

1. Practising is essential
2. Awareness and managing thoughts and attention
3. Emotion, intention and the message of the music
4. Interactive musical relationships
5. The audience's role in the performer's flow experience
6. The influence of past experiences during the performance
7. Unique interpretations of flow
8. The outcomes of having experienced flow or not

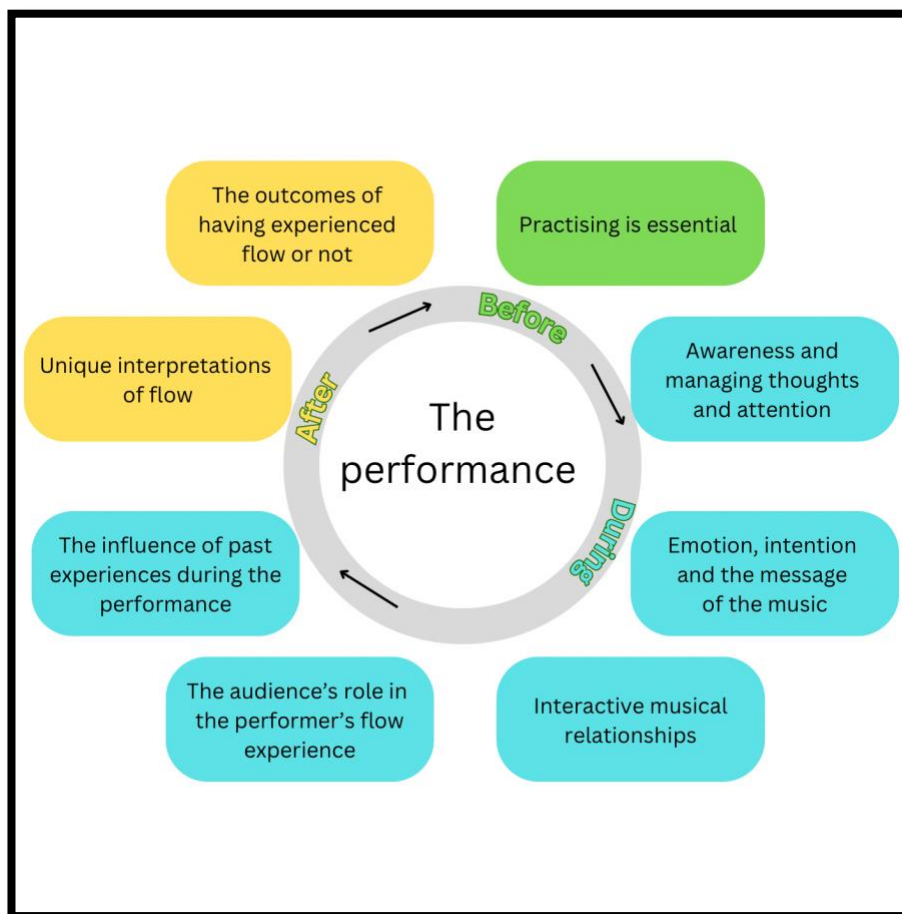


Figure 1: The eight group experiential themes that emerged from the cross-case analysis

The cross-case analysis has been categorised into three main parts, namely before, during and after a concert. The findings have shown that *prior* to the concert preparation and practising plays an extremely important role for all of the participants in order to create the opportunity for flow to occur. *On stage*, participants attach great value to being aware and managing their thoughts and attention. This, together with focusing on their emotion, intention and the message

of the music, promotes their flow experiences. Regarding other people, the participants may be influenced both positively and negatively by interactive musical relationships, and by the audience. The participants have admitted that their performance is influenced by past experiences as they have gained confidence and coping mechanisms from past experiences that can help them in their current performance. *After* experiencing flow, the participants are able to create their own unique interpretations of flow. Lastly, the participants reflect on and tell about the outcomes of having experienced flow or not. This then serves as motivation to practise and prepare again, resulting in the experience moving full circle.

3.6.1 Group experiential theme 1: Practising is essential

All of the participants state that preparation prior to the concert plays a very big role in their flow experiences. Piet emphasises the importance of preparation by stating that the very first thing he needs is “to be sufficiently prepared”. If he does not feel prepared, then “a flow experience is basically impossible” (Piet 3:14). He also believes that flow should be the result of “having the requisite things in place (3:53) rather than making flow your main goal and striving for it all the time. Zanta also agrees with Piet by saying that it is impossible to experience flow “if there is anything that you are worried about technically” and that “the only way to become free enough to enter a flow state” is when you have done “excessive work in preparation” (Zanta 1:19). Mary also agrees and confirms that preparation is extremely important and states that she managed to achieve flow because she “was very well prepared” (Mary 2:105). She felt that she had a good challenge-skill balance, and this enabled her to feel free and effortless.

Vladimir feels similarly to Piet, Zanta and Mary about the importance of preparation and elaborates on his various kinds of preparations before the performance. He states that his preparations are of both a physical and a mental nature. Vladimir believes that intense physical practice is one of the most important things a performer must do before a concert. Being in good shape also helps, as well as working out which bowings and fingerings he is going to use. He also tries to have as many preparation concerts as possible before the actual concert.

On the day of the performance, Vladimir always arrives early to prepare.

I always arrive more than an hour early, so that I have a few minutes in the hall by myself and I can play a few notes. Then I can calm myself down and by the time the concert starts I have gotten through my “freak out” moment and I can calm down and enjoy it” (Vladimir 1:38).

Vladimir also prepares by visualising the whole performance experience beforehand, from beginning to end. He also does a lot of research on the pieces he is playing in order to find something special about them and connect with them.

None of the participants teach their students explicitly about flow, but all of them teach their students techniques that will help to create opportunities for flow to occur. Miro clarifies this approach by stating that students should learn how to master their instruments first before they can attempt to reach the high mental state of flow. Mary agrees and says that for this reason, she only teaches her students to “relax and think of nothing other than enjoying the moment” (Mary 2:125). Piet and Zanta also agree with Miro and believe that flow is a product of proper preparation and attention management.

So, I think my students should hopefully experience flow if they are properly prepared, and they have learnt to manage their attention, to name just a few of the essentials (Piet 3:54).

Zanta helps her students prepare by encouraging them to focus their attention on the physical requirements of the violin that may create the possibility for flow to occur, for example, to “concentrate on the bow, the feel of your bow on the string, or just constantly feel whether the left hand is relaxed” (Zanta 1:56). Similar to Zanta’s method, Miro explains that the first thing a student should learn is technique and “the ability to control your instrument” (Miro 1:54).

Vladimir also encourages his students to prepare by visualizing their performance because then it feels like they have done it before.

I also teach my students to think through the whole thing, what you are going to wear, what you are going to do on that day, who's going to be there, imagining the examiners, imagining walking in before the time, while you are playing and the applause at the end, and then you are fine. When you are going through that, it becomes easier (Vladimir 1:39).

3.6.2 Group experiential theme 2: Awareness and managing thoughts and attention

All of the participants explained that they have an enhanced feeling of being aware and are actively managing their thoughts while on stage in a performance, and that this greatly influences their ability to achieve flow. The participants have shown active and receptive ways of being aware of and managing thoughts and attention.

Taking on a more active role is Mary’s process of being present. During flow, Mary feels particularly present. She describes being present as a “feeling of being totally focussed and consumed in the moment” (Mary 2:97) and acknowledges that extreme concentration is necessary for her to be present. She also admits that experiencing a certain amount of stress

on stage helps her to reach “a state of full concentration” (Mary 2:77). When in the state of full concentration, she claims that in order to then be in the zone, she must “simply try and relax and think of nothing other than enjoying the moment” (Mary 2:125). Vladimir reacts similarly to Mary in a performance. To achieve flow, he tries to “let go” (Vladimir 1:40) rather than think too much about technical requirements. He manages to “let go” by trying to “be in the music” rather than to think about the technicalities. Imagining playing for someone who is not at all judgemental helps him to be in the music.

Piet feels that to be in the zone, or to be able to experience flow, he must feel physically in control of his body. To gain control also requires a great amount of concentration, just as Mary requires in order to be in the zone. When on stage, Piet concentrates on getting the physical things in place by “being in the moment, by perceiving the sense of touch adequately, and to adequately observe the actions of the bow” (Piet 3:22), similarly to what Zanta teaches her students about concentrating on the bow. Piet deliberately makes small adjustments to his left hand, like pressing harder or lighter in order to feel exactly where his fingertips touch the string, or he will apply his “naming fix” to the bow, which entails simply looking at the bow and naming what he sees, so he will say “sounding point 5, 4, 3, 2 or 1” and when he does this, he feels that he regains control very quickly (Piet 3:20). Similar to Piet, when on stage Zanta is actively aware of three violin-specific points of focus, namely intonation, making sure that the left hand is relaxed, and being very aware of the bow’s contact on the string ensuring that she gets the sound that she desires. When Miro is in flow, he feels relaxed and has good coordination between his body and fingers.

Piet explains that this concentration on the left hand and bow also prevents allowing space in his head for negative thoughts.

If I forget to manage that, and sometimes I really do forget to manage my attention properly, then I get caught up in negative thoughts and criticise myself. If I’m on stage and not doing well, I get into an internal dialogue of regret and criticism... If I can succeed and remind myself to pay attention from the outset to the critical things, then there is no room because our attention is limited. If you pay sufficient attention to the right things, then there is actually no attention space left for disrupting thoughts. So, if I can remind myself to do that, I am okay on stage (Piet 4:2).

Zanta feels the same as Piet about negative thoughts in her head when playing and states that “if you are worried about something that is wrong somewhere in your family or so, then it is difficult to separate your thoughts from that” (Zanta 1:27). Vladimir also agrees by saying when you have “voices in your head, and thinking about other things” he does not think it is possible to experience flow. Miro states that one has to be psychologically very strong to be able to

overcome these negative thoughts which he also experience, like Zanta, Piet and Vladimir do. Miro explains that during preparation, a performer inserts information into his subconscious for months, and then has one single moment where it all has to come out and be presented on stage. He admits that a single negative thought can have a completely deactivating effect on this requirement of a performer. Zanta also says that when intimidated by someone in the audience, she feels an overpowering sense of self-consciousness, to such an extent that she cannot listen objectively, be aware of her body or manage her attention or thoughts. Miro and Mary say that intimidation also poses a threat to their possible flow experience, and when he feels intimidated, Miro says he reacts by “killing that thinking” (Miro 1:32). Miro, Mary, Zanta and Piet also think that a flow experience can eliminate and overcome the performance anxiety that causes disruptive thoughts.

When in flow, Piet claims to experience no performance anxiety.

It just feels exactly right. Time does not matter. It is not a struggle. It is loaded with meaning. The meaningfulness of the experience is just complete, and the whole idea of anxiety does not even make sense in that context. So, if you're taken up by the beauty and the meaning of the music, in other words, if you are having a total aesthetic experience, anxiety does not make sense” (Piet 4:6).

Similar to Piet, Zanta also feels that sometimes an intense flow state can override the performance anxiety. Sometimes she feels the anticipation anxiety of a performance as much as three days before a concert, but then by “trying to allow the freedom to flow through...flow takes over from that anxiety” (Zanta 1:61). She also feels that the “awareness of flow as a desire for the performance helps one to overcome the anxiety, because it takes your attention away from just being anxious” to the possibility of attaining flow (Zanta 1:63).

Piet states that when he focuses intensely and very exclusively on what he hears for a few minutes, then listening is “without exception” his “gateway to flow” (Piet 3:25). He says that when he listens in such a focused way, which takes him a while to achieve, he believes that it aids in the integration of all the sensory information which results in the musical and physical challenges simply falling in place (Piet 3:24). Because of the time it takes to activate this intense way of listening, Piet admits that he is more likely to experience flow in the practice room.

To a lesser extent, Zanta and Vladimir also value listening, as they state that their flow experience cannot be influenced too much if their auditory requirements are met. Zanta and Vladimir, however, both feel that it is easier to manage their thoughts and attention if their physical situation is good. For this reason, they try to minimize distractions such as clothing

discomfort, out-of-tune instruments, and health problems. Vladimir also states that breathing exercises help to calm him and make him feel present.

Vladimir and Miro feel strongly about the fact that you have a choice when it comes to what you focus your attention on. Vladimir believes that “a lot of it is what you make of it” (Vladimir 1:24) and Miro believes “it takes exactly the same amount to make yourself happy and unhappy. The same amount of energy and wish and will to make yourself happy or unhappy, so choose what you want to make yourself” (Miro 1:27).

One of the more receptive activities that occur on stage is awareness. Although Piet is very aware of the physical requirements and the actions he performs to get the results desired, he “does not feel removed” from the situation. He states: “It is not as if I need to constantly give myself instructions. The musical impulse and the action to perform happens at the same time” (Piet 3:34). In other words, action-awareness and musical awareness is the same for him. When these are in balance, he explains that it becomes a “very holistic experience where the separation between you as subject and what you are busy with as object, fade or even disappears completely” (Piet 2:22). During her flow experience, Mary also experienced heightened awareness, but especially of her sensory experiences. She felt that this added to the intensity of her flow experience.

Because of the level of concentration during a flow state, all of the participants remarked that they lost all perception of time. They were in no sense aware of time passing. Piet summarises it by saying that “time stands still, or to put it differently, musical time becomes overriding. It is different from clock time. A long piece can feel very short, and a short piece can subjectively feel very long if you experience intense musical meaning with it. Yes, I think the experience of time is very different from the normal experience of time. I will call it musical time. Musical time dominates in the flow experience” (Piet 3:44).

3.6.3 Group experiential theme 3: Emotion, intention and the message of the music

When telling the story about her vivid flow experience, Mary admits that she was very aware of her own feelings and emotions. She also has the desire for her performance to be “meaningful” (Mary 2:119). She sees the stage as a place where “raw emotion is celebrated” (2:84) and finds it very satisfying to be able to express her emotions on stage. She finds the violin to be a very fitting instrument in this regard as the option to control the vibrato and the bow so actively helps her to amplify the emotion she wants to convey.

All of the participants stated that it is important to them to convey the message of the music to the audience. Vladimir states that he “really tries to make it an experience for the people who came to listen” (Vladimir 1:18). In order to know what the message of the music is, Mary and Vladimir try to understand the composer’s intention of the music and to find a way to associate with that intention in order to give an accurate rendering to the audience. Vladimir does this by doing extensive research on the piece of music he is playing. In addition to fulfilling the composer’s intention, Mary also finds it helpful to have a personal intention when performing. As she is religious, her intention is to be a disciple on stage.

Piet states that a big part of his attention goes to conveying the meaning of the music.

If I feel like I’m producing sound successfully and it is congruent with the musical meaning I want to convey, then I am very happy! Then I am on cloud nine! (Piet 3:42).

It is also when he starts “thinking musically” (Piet 3:22) that he experiences flow. Before walking on stage, Zanta has a very unique ritual where she imagines her head opening up for inspiration from above to flow through her. This helps her to focus on the “depth and the beauty” (Zanta 1:62) of the music which is also one of her main gateways to flow. Miro sees a musician as a messenger of the music.

Now, after fifty years of experience with that instrument in my hand, I have found one very simple truth: that we are simply messengers. We study all our lives to be messengers between what is on the paper of the music which is given, and to pass it to the audience. Our goal is to be that messenger (Miro 1:9).

He does, however, warn that he is careful not to make the message too much about himself as the music is in his eyes the composer’s message, not ours. Zanta agrees to some extent by saying that she tries to remove herself from the situation.

In order for my thoughts about myself, and my consciousness of myself versus other people or colleagues not to disrupt the process of inspiration that I believe must flow through me, I remove myself from the picture so that the music can come through me and reach the audience in the purest way (Zanta 1:14).

3.6.4 Group experiential theme 4: Interactive musical relationships

Piet has a beautiful view of chamber music. He regards it as “that component of performing with other people, and it is not just the people, it is not just that you are participating in a communal experience with another personality, it is also that you are combining with another musical personality and that is just amazing to me. That is one of the critical factors in experiencing flow” (Piet 3:49). He states that he easily achieves flow when he rehearses with a colleague because he often feels that when playing with other capable musicians, “it pulls one up to a greater whole, and that is very enjoyable” (Piet 2:42). He also says that “when one really has a good

rapport with the people you play with, and if you kind of play through them, then it is much easier to forget yourself than when you actually feel like a soloist on stage” (Piet 2:39). Mary agrees with Piet and states that she found that a special connection or like-mindedness with her colleagues on stage contributes to her flow experience.

Vladimir has a very rich chamber music history and from his years of experience in this capacity, he admits that when colleagues in a smaller ensemble believe differently and disagree on many topics, it is almost impossible to experience flow together. He also explains that group flow is impossible for him when your fellow musicians are not sufficiently prepared. He believes that to achieve group flow you have to “work well with the people you play with” (Vladimir 1:21) and they need to respect you and listen to you. Similarly, Zanta confirms that group flow is only possible when you work well with your fellow musicians. She did indeed experience flow in a group setting, even though there had not been enough practice time for the group to rehearse together. The individual musicians prepared on their own. She attributes this success of having experienced flow despite insufficient rehearsal time for the group to friendship in the group, as well as being able to rely on each other no matter what. Because of her positive experiences in a chamber music setting, she finds it to be a very special way to experience flow and claims that it is the result of individual musicians meeting “each other in a place where things” are possible (Zanta 1:20).

3.6.5 Group experiential theme 5: The audience’s role in the performer’s flow experience

All of the participants acknowledge that the audience plays a significant role in their flow experiences on stage. Mary mentions that an interactive relationship between her as the performer and the audience is important to her because the exchange of emotions in this regard offers her a great deal of energy (Mary 2:78). The audience’s reaction is thus a form of immediate feedback for her, and also for Vladimir as he also feels that his flow experience is intensified by the reaction of the audience. When he plays a slow movement and experiences that he can hear a pin drop, he is reassured that the audience is in flow with him. Miro also values the audience’s reaction and finds it rewarding when he notices that the audience is in flow with him. Piet also agrees by saying that the audience plays a role in encouraging his flow experiences on stage. He believes that if he feels musically convinced, this conviction is transferred to the audience and results in them also feeling musically convinced. He explains that “if one really has the experience on stage that the audience is with you, that the audience also really becomes part of the musical experience, so they are completely involved and kind of with you in the flow of the music”, then the opportunity for flow is promoted.

Zanta agrees with Mary and Piet that she finds reassurance from the audience's reaction.

I can read the audience. You know from the audience's participation and intensity of listening you can tell whether they pick up the flow state or not. So, I knew that it was successful because after a movement you can hear the sound of an audience member who blows out their breath after I finished a piece. You hear how people have a breath out when you finish your piece. I hear that acutely. Sometimes I just glance over their faces, and I can see their expressions on their faces, and you can tell a lot from that. I don't focus on that, because I don't want to be brought too much into that, because that could break my flow. It is a fine line between how aware you are of your audience and how much you stay in flow (Zanta 1:47).

Zanta, Vladimir and Miro feel that flow is not only for their enjoyment, but also meant to be shared. Zanta thus believes that one needs an audience in order to achieve flow, and that it is impossible for her to achieve flow alone in her practice room. Vladimir also needs an audience as his goal is to "inspire people, to give them a message, or to tell a story" (Vladimir 1:41). For Miro the audience plays an irreplaceable role in his performance as he sees himself as the messenger of the musical meaning and without the audience there is no receiver of his message. He described the successful conveying of this message as "this type of flow which went through the whole audience and everything, and you feel that's that. Nothing can ever be better" (Miro 1:22).

3.6.6 Group experiential theme 6: The influence of past experiences during the performance

Zanta and Miro are both musicians who have the privilege of years of experience in performance, and both feel that this experience is of great value to them and helps them achieve flow. Zanta is in the privileged position of being able to say that she experiences flow "almost all the time" (Zanta 1:37), thanks to the fact that she knows herself so well on stage after being in the profession for over 40 years. She explains that she experiences a "certain feeling of self-confidence" that she has built up "because of experience" (Zanta 1:25).

Miro credits a big part of a performer's success on stage to his past experiences.

How you are going to react in that moment is entirely based on your past experiences. If you have a lot of experience, if you have had failures, if you have great moments, all of this is in your mind because the subconscious of people is a computer which never forgets anything. Whatever you realise in your life is there forever. Maybe you forget that or maybe you don't know it, maybe you forgot what happened 20 years ago, but

your subconscious never sleeps and is always there. The more experience you have in there and the more information you have in (I'm calling it the hard drive) the back of your head - the information you have when the moment comes on stage or wherever and you are able to pull it out and pop out and say "OK, mirror, you remember that?" and you are saying "Gosh, how did I know that, how do I know that?" I know it because it's been there, but you forgot it's been there, but in a moment when it has to come out, it comes out (Miro 1:38).

Surprisingly, Mary experienced that sometimes her vivid flow experience served as a discouragement to pursue future flow experiences as she constantly compares her current performances with that vivid flow experience.

It makes me compare all my performances to that one particular vivid flow experience, and if I did not experience flow as intensely as that one time, I would not be as excited or fulfilled as I should have been. Constantly comparing my current performance takes the joy out of the performance and sometimes even serves as a discouragement (Mary 2:96).

3.6.7 Group experiential theme 7: Unique interpretations of flow

All of the participants have formed their own, personal way of describing and interpreting flow. Mary describes her flow experience as "the moment just consumed me completely - as if it had accepted me" (Mary 2:49). During flow Mary also experiences the feeling that she is able to escape to a safe space where it is possible to wear her heart on her sleeve.

Piet describes flow as "literally feeling one with what you do, and with the circumstances in which you do it" (Piet 2:35). When experiencing flow, Piet explains that he almost feels like an audience member. When he gets goosebumps from his own playing, like an audience member, then he is reassured that he is experiencing flow.

Zanta describes flow as "being in the zone where things flow" (Zanta 1:15). She does not feel, however, that she is losing her mind's active role during the flow experience. For her, flow is thus a fine balance between rational presence and the absence of this balance. Zanta explains her sense of control as a perfect balance of technical effortlessness and intensity when in flow.

I am aware of a certain feeling of effortlessness, even though there is a lot of intensity, so it is a strange combination of those two opposing forces actually which are both present. You know, as a violinist there is a lot of intensity involved in playing, but it is as if when I give all that intensity, physically and mentally, and I get into the flow state, it is like a perfect balance that happens. It is almost like that yin-yang sign. Like something

that is always fifty of the one and fifty of the other. One is not more than the other (1:50).

When in flow, Zanta does not have a strong sense of self, but rather feels “part of a bigger whole, a whole where things are flowing” (Zanta 1:52). Similarly, when Miro is in flow, he feels relaxed, and this relaxation influences his self-consciousness in a positive way and gives him the feeling of being “on top of the world” (Miro 1:49)

Miro describes flow as when “you are reaching your highest possible vibration of yourself and of what you are as a person” (Miro 1:15). He has developed his own interpretation of flow over the years, and he explains that one can only do this when you understand the meaning of life and the meaning of your playing.

There are many theories, but as long as you understand for yourself the meaning of life and the meaning of your playing, and what your role is.... When you understand that, then you can reach your high (1:20).

As one ages, and repeats certain programmes or pieces, “you learn a lot from yourself” (1:17). Technical demands are fewer than when you were a beginner, or when you played the piece for the first time, and this leaves space for a “higher understanding” (1:17) of the musical meaning. Miro believes that “everyone finds their flow experiences for themselves, depending on the factors surrounding them” (1:57).

3.6.8 Group experiential theme 8: The outcomes of having experienced flow or not

Having experienced flow or the absence of flow during a performance has various effects on the participants. Piet states that as a result of experiencing flow before, he now has an enhanced feeling of “unity with the music, your instrument, the sound you produce and also the audience” (Piet 2:34). He also believes that having experienced flow “makes one a better performer as it gives you something really meaningful to aim for” (Piet 4:3). By this he means that flow can serve as a motivation rather than a goal to aim for. Mary agrees with Piet by saying that “once you have tasted it, you will always want more, which results in working harder in order to be well prepared so that you can just let go and let flow take over” (Mary 2:133). Vladimir also agrees by saying that “you are always striving for that same feeling again” (Vladimir 1:32). Flow has an inspiring effect on Vladimir. When he gets the feeling that a performance is going well, and he is experiencing flow, he wants to play even better and experience flow even more intensely.

Regarding bad performance experiences Vladimir explains that he believes “it is also important to have experiences like that where you mess up and you can go on” (Vladimir 1:37). They serve as motivation to “try harder the next day or the next time” (Vladimir 1:54), but he tries to

put such experiences behind him. He says that it is important to learn from them, but even more important not to hold on to them. Similar to Vladimir, Miro explains that as a musician you cannot always be perfect, and in such cases where he is unsatisfied with his performance, he thinks back to previous experiences where he was satisfied, and this motivates him and makes it worth trying again.

When not experiencing flow, Piet feels “regretful” and “frustrated” and tries to cope with the bad experiences by following the advice of a friend which is to raise your low experiences.

One should not expect, as a performer, to have big experiences all the time. [Piet] said what you should do is try to raise your low experiences. You must try to look at it as a graph. It is unrealistic to expect to have peak experiences all the time and also unrealistic to expect to be raising your peak experiences all the time. What is much more realistic is trying to lift the bottom of your graph. To minimise your really bad experiences on stage. So when I remember that speech he gave me then, I can cope afterwards with my bad performance, and then I think, “Oh well, that is just part of life. It is unfortunate, but hopefully I will do better next time”, and then I try to remind myself to manage my attention on stage properly (Piet 4:1)

When Zanta does not experience flow during a performance she worries that she got in the way of the music.

I am disappointed and I worry that I got into the way of my music - that is what it feels like, and that means that I didn't succeed with my goal. I see myself, as a musician, as an instrument for the music. Me, not my instrument, but me as a player, as an instrument in service of the music. I am a vehicle through which the music has to come. If I stop that flow that feels like a sin against music (Zanta 1:57).

The outcome of Mary's vivid flow experience played a big role in the forming of her identity, especially as a performer. Prior to her vivid flow experience, she was unsure of what she wanted to say, or achieve with her playing.

All these uncertainties reflected in my music-making and resulted in my teachers and peers constantly asking me the question, “What do you want to say through this music?” (Mary 2:45).

Her vivid flow experience enabled her to realise that she was able to say what she wanted to say and gave her the validation that she has indeed “found her voice as a performer” (Mary 2:53). Mary also finds that religion plays a very big role in her identity. The emotional effect that religious experiences have on her performances contributes a great deal to the physical outcome. She mentions that the “tangible feeling of God's presence” left her with “goosebumps” and a trembling heart (Mary 2:68).

4 Discussion

In the next section the eight group experiential themes that emerged in my findings will be discussed and related to the relevant scholarly literature. The findings will further be linked to my two research questions, namely how do five professional violinists, who teach and perform in South Africa, make sense of their lived experiences of flow during solo and chamber music performances, and to what extent does Csikszentmihalyi's (2014:133) flow theory explain the inhibiting and promoting conditions of flow experiences for the five violinists. The section will finish with the implications for practice and my conclusion.

4.1 Group experiential theme 1: Practising is essential

The challenge-skill balance is the most universal precondition for achieving flow (Moral-Bofill *et al.*, 2023:3). Sinnamon (2021:1) says it best when she explains that to achieve flow or a peak performance experience, you need "plain hard work". Antonini Philippe and Singer *et al.* (2022:3) also explain that appropriate practice generates more control over the frequency of emerging flow states. The participants from this current study emphasise that flow is impossible without proper preparation. Brown (2020:87) agrees that excellence is impossible without preparation, but also addresses the importance of mindful practice, and positive thought when solving a problem. He states that when musicians practice with neutral judgement and with a sense of acceptance, a more simple and positive outlook is cultivated in their practice routine. Zanta states that if you are worried about anything technically, then flow is impossible. Antonini Philippe and Singer *et al.* (2022:2) agree and say that when an activity has been mastered, it requires less physical and mental involvement.

Vladimir prepares mentally as well by visualizing his performance in advance. Research shows that having clear mental plans and knowing all the variables beforehand, which can be done by visualizing the performance, can help attain a flow state (Antonini Philippe & Singer, *et al.*, 2022:3). Rituals, such as visualization, are also described as short-term performance preparation and are performed to promote the best possible performance conditions for the specific performer (Antonini Philippe & Kosirnik, *et al.*, 2022:1029)

None of the participants teach their students about flow theory, but rather focus on the technical requirements that need to be in place in order for flow to occur. There are no studies that indicate how teachers are supposed to teach their students how to experience flow, only studies that look into teachers that experience flow themselves when teaching (Kang, 2023; Park, 2022). Li (2020:56), however, suggests that flow might be carried over from teacher to student.

He states that music teachers who are motivated and positive about performance can set a good example for their students. If the teacher gives the student a piece which offers a good balance of challenge and skill for the student, this also provides scaffolding opportunities.

4.2 Group experiential theme 2: Awareness and managing thoughts and attention

Mary and Vladimir try to let go and not think too much about technical demands. On the other hand, Piet and Zanta concentrate on getting the physical aspects into place by focusing on violin-specific matters such as the sense of touch on the violin and noticing what their bows are doing, as well as actively making small changes to feel totally in control. Being in touch with what one is feeling physically is necessary to produce a positive performance that allows flow to occur (Antonini Philippe & Kosirnik, *et al.*, 2022:1029). Being in touch with one's physical feelings contributes to the feeling that one has good coordination in the body, which Miro requires for being in flow. By adopting focused attention strategies, one can develop a sense of control, which disables negative thoughts. Focusing your attention on the music and losing your consciousness of self helps to eliminate negative pre-and post-performance thoughts (Li, 2020:65).

The participants in this current study state that being in a state of full concentration leaves no space in the mind for negative thoughts to occur. Zielke *et al.* (2023:2) state that disruptive and negative thoughts, as well as anxiety and the fear of making mistakes, can inhibit one and take one out of the flow state.

Intimidation can cause performance anxiety, which makes it difficult for flow to occur, but Miro, Mary, Piet and Zanta have experienced that flow can overcome performance anxiety. Li (2020:64) agrees by saying that when musicians experience intense flow, MPA is less likely to occur. When flow is high, MPA is low, and vice versa (Fullagar *et al.*, 2013:249). Thus flow is seen as a desirable state that may help reduce MPA. Cohen and Bodner (2019:420) conducted a study on 202 musicians who play professionally in a classical orchestral. Their findings showed that flow experiences are helpful in alleviating music performance anxiety.

The participants also claim that listening and auditory requirements, meaning achieving the sound they desire, are crucial in achieving flow. Although there are no studies directly addressing how listening and auditory requirements promote flow on stage during a performance, there are studies stating that musicians experienced flow more easily when they listened to music, than when they had to imagine a performance where the challenge-skill balance was met (Zielke *et al.*, 2023:2). Being deeply involved in an activity could lead to the

transformation of time (Habe *et al.*, 2019:188). During flow, the participants had no awareness of time.

4.3 Group experiential theme 3: Emotion, intention and the message of the music

Music has a strong connection with emotion because of the similar nature of patterns of tension and relaxation that occur in both. Musical performances are often greatly influenced by the emotion of the music or the intention to communicate an emotional message (Thompson, 2015:247). During musical performance, complex cognitive skills such as emotional intelligence and the ability to convey emotions are required (Antonini Philippe & Kosirnik, *et al.*, 2022:1024). Antonini Philippe and Singer, *et al.* (2022:1) state that the function of emotion is crucial as it plays an important role in preparation for flow, the phase of entering flow, and the exit from flow, as well as regulating flow over time. Research has shown that the interpretation of the music in terms of defining the emotion and the intention can help the performer to become absorbed in the music and performance. This absorption can also lead to a loss of self-consciousness (Chen, 2023:1298). Mary admits that she was very aware of her own feelings and emotions when in flow and thus followed the approach of interpretation leading to full absorption, a loss of self-consciousness, and finally the flow experience. The other participants also carefully interpret the music in order to fully understand the composer's intention and message. The participants state that conveying the message of the music to the audience is very important to them. The findings in a study conducted by Ginsborg and Gayford (2003:29) showed that an optimal performance was one characterized by the performer having a clear intention or emotional message to communicate. What also contributes to the optimal performance experience is the performer being emotionally engaged, and believing that the message they are communicating through their playing is received by the audience.

4.4 Group experiential theme 4: Interactive musical relationships

Piet states that combining with another musical personality is one of the critical factors for him in experiencing flow, but one of the other participants mentioned that chamber music situations lacking in mutual respect can have devastating consequences on the flow state. Mutual respect among colleagues is very important for the participants in experiencing flow in a group setting (Hendricks, 2018:48). Antonini Philippe and Kosirnik, *et al.* (2022:1028) found that social factors have a significant influence on musicians' performances. These social factors include social support and encouragement from colleagues, professional recognition and respect from colleagues, and a positive performance atmosphere with positive exchanges with others present. In addition to these social factors, Habe *et al.* (2019:3) suggest that group flow is only

possible if all the members of the group share the same vision, ownership and contribution, and if they communicate well with each other and have the same goal as a group. The study also states that musicians experience flow more often in group performances as less performance anxiety is experienced.

4.5 Group experiential theme 5: The audience's role in the performer's flow experience

The participants acknowledge that the audience plays a significant role in their flow experience. The exchange of energy between the performer and the audience, as well as the reactions of the audience, gives them a form of immediate feedback. Vladimir, Zanta, and Miro feel that flow is only possible if it is shared with others or with an audience. Studies tend to show the contrary. Performing in front of an audience often creates music performance anxiety for musicians, which results in them not being able to experience flow (Guyon *et al.*, 2022:5). Harmat *et al.* (2016:335) clarify this by stating that it has often been found that the presence of others has a strong influence on performance. When performing a task that is complex or in which the performer does not feel well prepared, an audience can impair the performer's presentation, but when simple or well-practised tasks are performed, the presence of an audience helps to enhance the performance. The presence of an audience leads to heightened arousal and evaluation apprehension, but also increases the value of the performance (Tozman & Peifer, 2016:335). These factors can have either a positive or negative influence on a performer, but in the case of this current study, the presence of an audience led to positive outcomes for the performers.

4.6 Group experiential theme 6: The influence of past experiences

Zanta states that her years of past experiences give her a certain degree of self-confidence, which helps her to achieve flow. Flow is often associated with confidence, autonomy and the ease with which actions are executed, which is possible after years of practice and experience (Antonini Philippe & Singer, *et al.*, 2022:2). Confidence is viewed as a facet of trust related to the future (Hendricks, 2018:51) and has two dimensions: feeling competent, and having a strong sense of self-esteem (Antonini Philippe & Kosirnik, *et al.*, 2022:1030). Because of Zanta's many years of experience as a performer, she has built up this confidence. Similarly, Miro accredits a performer's success on stage during present and future performances to past experiences, since he believes that how well a performer reacts on stage is dependent on his past experiences. These past experiences thus also give him the confidence to trust in the future.

In contrast with the research and statements above, Mary admits that her past flow experiences sometimes inhibit her expectations of future experience, because she compares all her current performances to her most vivid flow experience in the past, and that puts her current performances under a lot of pressure, which makes it hard for her to experience flow again. There is currently a gap in the literature on this specific problem.

4.7 Group experiential theme 7: Unique interpretations of flow

Mary described flow as a moment where she is completely consumed and accepted. Similarly, Piet describes flow as feeling at one with what he is doing. This feeling of being completely involved and being at one with what you are doing refers to what is often called an embodied sound, where the whole body is involved in the performance (Antonini Philippe & Kosirnik, *et al.*, 2022:1030).

Zanta describes flow as the perfect balance between rational presence and the absence of this balance. In other words, a good balance between intense concentration and attentional orientation is necessary. This balance can also lead to a feeling of transcendence, where musicians feel that they are in another dimension, alluding to Zanta's sense of a lack of rational presence.

Miro describes flow as a state where he reaches his highest possible abilities and potential. Flow is truly a complex state of consciousness that arises when individuals can perform activities that hold personal significance to them, because they are experiencing an enhanced sense of control (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990:68). Flow is also seen as a peak psychological state (Antonini Philippe & Kosirnik, *et al.*, 2022:1024). Both descriptions contribute to Miro's explanation of flow as being a state where one reaches one's highest abilities and potential, as they explain the complexity of flow.

4.8 Group experiential theme 8: The outcomes of having experienced flow or not

The participants state that having experienced flow can serve as great motivation to experience it again. Li (2020:64) state that flow can offer long-term motivation and potential achievement for performers. As flow is such an enjoyable state, the participants expressed that they are motivated to work hard in order to achieve flow again (Araújo & Hein, 2019:107). Flow thus serves as intrinsic motivation, which can be divided into three themes, namely, the inclination to play and the delight of playing, being totally committed in the sense that one gives one's whole

being to the activity, and the goal of mastery, meaning that one wants to prove to oneself that one's competence is adequate (Antonini Philippe & Kosirnik *et al.*, 2022:1031).

Flow also assists with constructing one's personal identity (Delle Fave & Bassi, 2016:3). When musicians are in flow, they feel completely drawn in and experience a strong sense of unity with the music (Antonini Philippe & Singer, *et al.*, 2022:1). This sense of unity and identification with the music reassured Mary that she could connect with the music and convey an accurate rendition of the emotions and intentions of the music to the audience, leading to her finding her identity as a musician.

5 Conclusion

In order to answer my secondary research question, namely identifying the extent to which Csikszentmihalyi's (2014:133) flow theory explains the inhibiting and promoting conditions of flow experiences for the five professional violinists during solo and chamber music performances, I will compare the eight group experiential themes that emerged from the findings with Csikszentmihalyi's (2014:133) nine conditions of flow.

Table 2: Nine conditions of flow

Group experiential themes	Link to the nine conditions of flow
Practising is essential	Challenge-skill balance: The participants declare that extensive practice is necessary to achieve flow. They teach their students the necessary skills to have the possibility for flow to occur. Sense of control: Vladimir visualizes the performance beforehand, which leads to an increased feeling of control during the actual performance
Awareness and managing thoughts and attention	Action awareness merge: When in flow, Miro feels relaxed and that there is good coordination between his fingers and body Concentration on the task at hand: During flow, Mary experiences a high state of concentration Sense of control: Piet and Zanta concentrate on violin-specific demands in order to focus. This gives them a physical and mental sense of control. Transformation of time: All of the participants experienced losing all awareness of time.
Emotion, intention and the message of the music	Clear goals: The participants' goals for their performances include making them meaningful, and conveying a clear message to the audience.
Interactive musical relationships	Loss of self-consciousness: When Piet has a very good rapport with the person he is performing with, it feels like he is playing through them, neutralising the feeling of being a soloist on stage.
The audience's role in the performers' flow experience	Unambiguous feedback: The participants receive energy and reassurance from the audience's reaction during a performance.

Group experiential themes	Link to the nine conditions of flow
The influence of past experiences	Unambiguous feedback: From their own observations (feedback) from past experiences, Zanta and Miro know and have the confidence to feel safe in future performances.
Unique interpretations of flow	Action and awareness merge: Zanta and Piet feel one with what they are doing and have a good balance between rational presence and the absence of this balance.
The outcomes of having experienced flow or not	Autotelic experience: All of the participants stated that flow is a highly enjoyable experience that you cannot get enough of, and thus, it serves as great motivation to prepare and try to experience flow again.

Below are some more detailed examples of the extent to which Csikszentmihalyi's (2014:133) flow theory explains the inhibiting and promoting conditions of flow experiences for the five participants of this study.

- Having a *challenge-skill balance* requires that the musician has the necessary abilities and skills to carry out the requirements of the piece being played, as well as the music offering a challenge that is in line with the player's abilities. The piece should not be too hard or too easy, as it becomes boring for the performer then (Cohen & Bodner, 2021:185). In the current study, the performers indicated the importance of their preparation in order to develop the necessary skills to meet the challenges posed by their pieces. They did not indicate that the challenge level of the pieces performed had an influence on their flow experience.
- The *merging of action and awareness* can also be seen as the merging of body and mind (Habe & Biasutti, 2023:186). Miro explains that when he is in flow, he notices that he is relaxed and that there is good coordination in his body. Zanta also states that she has a good balance between rational presence and the absence of this balance. Piet explains that he feels one with what he is doing when he is in flow, indicating that his actions and awareness have merged.
- Csikszentmihalyi (2014:133) indicates that all *goals must be clear* and achievable. The goals of the participants in this study include making their performance meaningful, and conveying a message to the audience. To do this they needed to research what the composer's message of the music was, and find ways to relate to this in order to give an accurate rendition to the audience. This is a unique approach as the professional violinists in this study did not set achieving their own technical demands as goal, but rather considered other people and set the meaning and sharing of the composer's message as the goal for their performances.

- *Unambiguous feedback* helps to improve a musician's performance and confidence (McPherson *et al.*, 2022:3). Through the years of performing and evaluating their own playing, both Miro and Zanta have developed a certain degree of confidence, which allows them to react instinctively on stage, as well as to have a sense of trust in the future. The participants thus create unambiguous feedback for themselves through years of experience and self-evaluation after performances.
- *Concentration on the task at hand* is needed for performers to avoid getting distracted. Mary stated that during her flow experiences, she was completely absorbed in the moment and experienced a high level of concentration.
- *A sense of control* emerges when performers are deeply involved in their activity (Habe & Biasutti, 2023:187). To increase their sense of control during a performance, Piet and Zanta focus on violin-specific techniques which require a lot of control, such as making small changes to the sounding point of the bow or actively relaxing the left hand. This focuses their attention and reassures them that they are in control.
- *A loss of self-awareness* is explained as the state when musicians are deeply involved in expressing themselves when playing and when they can tune into and empathise with the music (Habe & Biasutti, 2023:188). Piet has had strong experiences with flow during chamber music performances and describes his feelings on stage as being able to play through someone. In this way he overcomes the feeling of playing solo.
- To experience a *transformation of time*, musicians have to be completely and deeply involved in their playing, often leading to a loss of self-awareness. Both of these conditions can result from having good concentration on the task at hand (Sinnett *et al.*, 2020:10). The participants of this current study all stated that they experienced a transformation a sense of of time during their flow experience. Piet explained this transformation beautifully by saying that musical time, rather than clock time, dominates in a flow experience.
- An *autotelic experience* leads to intrinsic motivation, meaning one does an activity simply for the joy thereof. The participants declared that they found their flow experiences to be very enjoyable and, in some cases, even life- and career-changing. They thus also see the flow experience as an autotelic experience. This offers great motivation for them to work hard and practise hard to experience flow again.

From the findings we can see that all of the nine conditions of flow were involved in the participants' flow experience. In addition to the nine conditions, the participants also experienced that having a feeling of acceptance contributed to their flow experience. The participants also indicated that a positive chamber music environment with constructive interaction, trust and respect among colleagues promotes flow. An interesting finding that emerged which was also a factor promoting flow for the participants was that they view themselves within the larger picture and do not focus too much on themselves. They experience

a loss of self-consciousness as individuals, but imagine themselves as part of something else. They explain that they feel part of something bigger, that they are a vehicle through which the music is transported, that they are simple messengers. They do not have an egoistic mindset when they are in flow. The participants also expressed that their flow experiences became more regular with age, which is a result of the self-confidence that comes with technical proficiency and years of experience.

5.1 Recommendations for further studies

Of the nine conditions of flow, the challenge-skill balance has been most fully researched in music contexts. Very few of the other eight conditions of flow have been researched and exploring these fields may enhance the literature and be beneficial for practice. Another recommendation for future research would be to clarify ways how to teach flow to students. Lastly, I recommend investigating how flow can be achieved again when a performer experiences a block as a result of constant comparison with a previous intense flow experience.

5.2 Implications for practice

The aim of this study was to offer a clear understanding of how five professional violinists make sense of their flow experiences, as well as offer a clear view of the extent to which Csikszentmihalyi's (2014:133) flow theory explains the inhibiting and promoting conditions of flow experiences for the five professional violinists. The findings suggest that the participants make sense of their flow experiences by noting that preparation is of the utmost importance. On-stage awareness, managing their thoughts, and focusing on the emotion, intention and the meaning of the music are all beneficial. Interactive musical relationships and the presence of an audience play a big role in their flow experiences as well as the influence of past experience. The participants formed unique interpretations of flow for themselves, with variable outcomes of having experienced and not having experienced flow. The findings also suggested that all nine of the conditions of flow theory were involved in the participants' flow experiences. In addition to the nine conditions of flow, the findings suggest that positive relationships and mutual respect among colleagues are necessary to experience flow, and that seeing yourself as part of the bigger picture is also beneficial in the promotion of flow. By documenting these findings, I create a better understanding of flow during performance and contribute to improving practice for performers and teachers.

6 Postlude

Ever since I can remember, I wanted to be a violinist. As no one in our family is a musician, my parents were sceptical and waited before sending me to violin lessons. They thought it was a childhood phase that would soon be over, but I did not give up. There was an inexplicable drive in me. After some time, they gave in and have been my biggest supporters ever since.

Later on, playing the violin and making music became my passion in life. I loved and adored it to such an extent that in the blink of an eye, I left behind my home, family, friends and everything that was familiar to pursue an international degree in violin performance. During those challenging years, filled with difficult sacrifices, a new passion emerged – I wanted to “give back” to my home country. I developed a newly founded appreciation for my musical upbringing in South Africa, and suddenly, that childhood drive was back, only this time, it had transformed into a desire to use my education and love for music to help develop the world of music in South Africa. During this time, I also experienced my first flow experience, which helped me feel that my identity as a performer had been confirmed and that I am ready to start my journey of “giving back”. I came back to my home country and started my doctorate with the theme of flow, as this flow event inspired me.

I truly feel that this study has been such a blessed gift, as it opened up so many ways in which I have already been able to give back to my home country by applying the knowledge gained through this study.

In my playing and teaching I have applied many of the techniques described by the performers from which I have also learned. To mention just a few:

- From Piet, I learnt to actively control my thoughts on stage and not to leave mind space for negative thoughts to distract me, and I teach my students to focus on violin-specific techniques in order to feel in control of their instruments and also to keep their minds off performance anxiety;
- From Zanta, I learnt and applied the ritual of imagining my head opening up on stage, making it possible for God’s inspiration and intention to flow through me into the audience. I also teach my students to imagine that they are stepping into a bubble on stage, which is a safe space, protected from the judgemental thoughts of others;
- From Miro, I learnt that I must always focus on the composer’s message and try my best to honour that. After this study, I spent much more time researching the history of my own pieces selected for performance, and I also did this with my students to give them a better understanding of the message of their pieces;

- From Vladimir, I learnt the importance of respect among colleagues and the power of a healthy work environment. Ever since our interview, I have tried my best to be more aware of the well-being of my colleagues, how respect is applied in groups, and now I make sure my students appreciate the importance of mutual respect;
- From Mary, I have learnt that being very emotional can be an advantage on stage, and can be what sets you apart as a performer, as your own emotions are entirely unique.

My wish is that this study will continue to inspire the musicians and the music teachers of South Africa and eventually make a significant contribution to the music world of our beloved country.

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ADDENDUM A: REFLECTIONS OF CARLI D'ALEBOUT, PARTICIPANT IN THE CURRENT STUDY.

Interview Questions

1. Could you tell me a little bit about your current whereabouts as a performer and teacher?

I am a regular player in the newly founded Mzansi National Philharmonic orchestra, the Johannesburg Philharmonic, the Gauteng Philharmonic, and KZNPO. I mostly play orchestral music.

I am also part of a piano quartet. We rehearse biweekly and have two concerts a year.

I also play in my church's band at Kerksondermure.

I teach at Afrikaanse Hoër Seunsskool and have a home studio.

2. Could you tell me why you play the violin?

When I make music, I feel challenged and satisfied. I love the challenge of having to constantly think creatively, and I love the satisfaction of having created something beautiful and meaningful. I love the experience of feeling emotions more powerfully when I play than I would normally do, and I find a lot of satisfaction in the thought that my playing could be very meaningful and impactful.

I play violin specifically because I feel it is such an emotional instrument. The bow can be compared to the breath of a singer, being able to grow or fade on a note, either very slowly or very quickly. With your left hand you can control the vibrato in any way you want, serving as a very effective tool to convey a specific emotion. Lastly, the range of the violin fits in the range of my own voice, thus can I easily associate with the sound and sing a phrase in my head.

3. Do you have a specific intention when performing?

Yes! Firstly, I imagine myself as God's instrument and always ask Him to use me as a disciple and messenger to tell or show the audience what He wants to say through me. I often think that this is done by feeling emotions, so I try my best to make myself as open and vulnerable as possible to feel the emotions very intensely, and thus to be able to hopefully help an audience member to also feel something that might make a positive difference in their life.

Also, I try to honor the composer by firstly researching his/her emotional state at the time of composing the piece, then trying to associate with the specific emotion in my own personal way, and then giving the emotion to the audience.

Lastly, I try to make it an enjoyable moment for myself, my colleagues on stage with me, and the audience. Music is beautiful and I am very grateful for it, and I try to show this whenever I play.

4. Could you tell me what your understanding of Csikszentmihalyi's Flow theory is?

It is when you are doing an activity and experiencing full involvement, focus, and enjoyment. It is when you are 'in the zone' and experiencing peak performance.

5. Can you relate to Csikszentmihalyi's explanation of flow?

Yes, I have had the privilege of experiencing flow several times in different settings – as a classical performer, as a teacher, and as a worship band musician.

6. Can you tell me a story about your most vivid flow experience during a performance?

(Vignette)

7. Do you have a specific relationship between flow and performance? Do you experience flow more often during a performance or in the practice room? And why

I experience flow more often on stage than in the practice room. I think it is a combination of the stress factor resulting in a state of full concentration, the energy I receive from the audience, and the fact that I am sharing my feelings, or the composer's feelings and emotions with them. I also find it easier to open myself up on stage rather than in a practice room, and I really do not know why. The stage, even though it is sometimes a place of judgement, feels to me like a safe space where raw emotion is celebrated.

8. What external factors influence your experience of flow in both a positive and negative way?

Positive:

When I know there is an appreciative audience listening.

When the weather is good – not too warm and humid

When I perform with people who have the same intention and musical ideas as me.

Negative:

When I am intimidated by someone in the audience

When the weather causes my fingers to sweat

When I play with colleagues who are either very negative about life in general, or whose musical ideas I do not agree with

9. Do you think that circumstances such as location influence your flow experience?

Yes, my flow experience in Italy was influenced by the romantic environment and setting of the stage. I also experience flow often when I play with the church band, where a great effort is made in the church building to create an atmosphere with the use of lighting, and I think since I am a very religious person, the idea of playing in God's house, with hundreds of fellow Christians singing along, contributes a great deal in facilitating flow.

10. Do you experience flow often? If so, how often?

No, not so often. Lately, I have mostly played orchestral performances, and I have never experienced flow in the current orchestra I am playing in.

If I have to give a number I would probably say 1-3 times a year.

11. Did your vivid flow experience assist or inhibit future flow experiences?

Both. It assisted me in the way that now I know what it can feel like, so with every performance I think back to that feeling of being totally focused and consumed at the moment, and this helps sometimes.

It also inhibits flow because the bar is set so high. It makes me compare all my performances to that one particular vivid flow experience and if I did not experience flow as intensely as that one time, I am not as excited or fulfilled as I should be. Constantly comparing my current performance to my flow performance takes the joy out of the performance and sometimes even serves as discouragement.

12. Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory consists of nine elements. Could you clarify how these nine elements were in balance during your flow experience by telling me a bit about

12.1 the challenge-skill balance. What were your preparations leading to the concert, or choice of repertoire like?

I was attending a summer festival in Italy, so I had a lot of practice time and many lessons with a very good professor who I liked very much, so technically I was very well prepared. I also had the opportunity to have a dress rehearsal in the hall the day before the concert, so I was able to visualize the concert very accurately in my head in the time leading up to the concert. I absolutely adored the repertoire and could associate so much with the emotions of the piece.

12.2 What was your action awareness like?

I remember thinking a bit about technical things and landmarks during my playing, but mostly I was just listening and adjusting the sound.

12.3 Your goal for the performance and if you knew that you were doing well?

I remember being very emotional in the time leading up to the concert. As usual, I prayed before the concert asking God for inspiration and to speak through me, but I think that unintentionally my goal, or need, was also to unload a bit of all the buried emotions inside me.

Yes, I knew I was doing well. I was surprised during the performance, thinking “wow, that sounded good” or “that felt nice”.

12.4 The feedback you got

My accompanist was the first person I met after the performance, and her exact words were ‘that is something I will not forget anytime soon’. Later I met my professor, who was not in the audience, and he said that he heard it went exceptionally well.

12.5 Your state of concentration

I had very good concentration. I remember being aware of my playing, and being able to focus on the technical things I had to remember, but not at all being distracted or even aware of the audience.

12.6 Your sense of control

I was able to change or control my sound as I wanted to. I had control over my body too – usually, my right hand, especially my right middle finger, loses power when I get nervous, resulting in untameable bow shakes, but in this particular performance it did not happen at all.

12.7 Your sense of self-consciousness

I was not at all self-conscious in terms of the audience, but I was very aware of my feelings and emotions, and body.

12.8 Your perception of time

I had lost all perception of time. It was as if time had become a blur. All that mattered was that moment.

12.9 If you saw the performance as an autotelic experience

Yes, definitely. I needed to release my emotions for my own mental health.

13. Do you inform your student of the flow theory? And how do you encourage or enable them to experience flow?

I feel a bit ashamed to answer this question, but no. I do not think that a beginner violinist can understand flow during a performance, or maybe I just do not know how to teach this to them. I will research the topic of how to teach flow to beginners.

I do, however tell them that once they are in a performance situation, they must simply try to relax and think of nothing other than enjoying the moment.

14. Do you like to talk about and share your flow experience with others?

I have not shared it with many people, but when I do I experience a flood of inspiration and energy.

15. How do you feel after a performance where you didn't experience flow?

I feel fine, but not as satisfied. It's cases like this that making music starts feeling like work. I realize that it is not possible to experience flow every time, but it is a bit discouraging when I do not experience flow since it is something that I would like to experience very often.

16. Have you ever experienced group flow? Could you tell me the story of it?

Yes, but only with an accompanist. Not with a bigger group.

17. do you think that having experienced flow makes you a better performer?

Yes, I think it serves as a great inspiration to try and be completely focused and open during a performance.

18. Do you think that musicians that have experienced flow have more motivation to practice or perform again?

Yes. I think experiencing flow is almost like an addiction. Once you have tasted it, you always want more, which results in working harder to be well prepared so that you can just let go on stage and let flow take over.

19. Could you describe what the relationship between flow and mindfulness is to you?

I think there is a big similarity between the two. To experience flow you must be mindful of your own body and mind, but not of the external factors.

20. Could you describe what the relationship between flow and music performance anxiety is to you?

I can't experience flow when I have a lot of performance anxiety. I cannot enjoy the moment when I am scared and stressed.

21. Do you associate flow with spirituality?

Yes. As my main goal for all my performances is to be a disciple, I believe that flow comes from God. To me, it feels like He is taking over, and I am just along for the very enjoyable, very satisfying ride.

ADDENDUM B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Could you tell me a little bit about your current whereabouts as a performer and teacher?
2. Could you tell me why you play the violin?
3. Do you have a specific intention when performing?
4. Could you tell me what your understanding of Csikszentmihalyi's Flow theory is?
5. Can you relate to Csikszentmihalyi's explanation of flow?
6. Can you tell me a story about your most vivid flow experience during a performance?
7. Do you have a specific relationship between flow and performance? Do you experience flow more often during a performance or in the practice room? And why
8. What external factors influence your experience of flow in both a positive and negative way?
9. Do you think that circumstances such as location influence your flow experience?
10. Do you experience flow often? If so, how often?
11. Did your vivid flow experience assist or inhibit future flow experiences?
12. Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory consists of nine elements. Could you clarify how these nine elements were in balance during your flow experience by telling me a bit about
 - 12.1 the challenge-skill balance. What were your preparations leading to the concert, or choice of repertoire like?
 - 12.2 what your action-awareness was like?
 - 12.3 your goal for the performance and if you knew that you were doing well?
 - 12.4 the feedback you got
 - 12.5 your state of concentration
 - 12.6 your sense of control
 - 12.7 your sense of self-consciousness
 - 12.8 your perception of time
 - 12.9 if you saw the performance as an autotelic experience
13. Do you inform your students of the flow theory? And how do you encourage or enable them to experience flow?
14. Do you like to talk about and share your flow experience with others?
15. How do you feel after a performance where you didn't experience flow?
16. Have you ever experienced group flow? Could you tell me the story of it?
17. Do you think that having experienced flow makes you a better performer?
18. Do you think that musicians who have experienced flow have more motivation to practice or perform again?
19. Could you describe what the relationship between flow and mindfulness is to you?

20. Could you describe what the relationship between flow and music performance anxiety is to you?
21. Do you associate flow with spirituality?

ADDENDUM C: AN ATLAS.TI 24 ANALYSIS OF THE FIVE PARTICIPANTS' INTERVIEWS

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**ADDENDUM D: PROGRAM NOTES OF TWO INTEGRATED
CONCERTS**



Carli D'Alebout

(24895350)

(Violin)

(1CK R01 L901P)

Concert recital for the
partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Music with Music Performance
in the Faculty of Arts
(School of Music)
of the North-West University,
Potchefstroom Campus.

Promoter: Prof. Piet Koornhof

Afrikaanse Hoër Seunskool Ouditorium

18 Mei 2024

19:00

Accompanist: Annalien Ball

This concert forms an integrated whole with my formal assignment for the Doctor of Music qualification, titled “Exploring Five Professional Violinists’ Flow Experiences During Solo and Chamber Music Performances.”

It is required that two of my four performances must form an integrated whole with my formal assignment. I created this integration by choosing my repertoire for the two performances based on my findings from the interviews conducted. Five professional violinists were asked about their flow experiences during performances, and from the list of repertoire in which they experienced flow, I then chose my programs for the two performances.

The goal of my performances is not to achieve flow as the participants did, but rather to pay tribute to their experiences by reflecting on the conditions, contexts, and stories of their flow experiences in these program notes.

Flow is a term established by the Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and can be described as an optimal experience in which the psychological state of being fully engaged in the pursuit of an activity is experienced so intensely that nothing else matters (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990:14). Flow is also described as “the holistic sensation that people feel when they act in total involvement (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000:36), being “in the zone”, and is similar to “peak experience” and “optimal experience” (Tan and Sin, 2020:36). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) developed nine ways in which to construct flow. Based on these dimensions, flow is (1) a challenge-skill balance, where one’s skill must be sufficient to support the challenges presented by the activity, (2) action-awareness merging, meaning one must be certain what one’s actions lead to, (3) having clear goals and knowing instantaneously how well one is doing. In other words, immediately be able to objectively judge one’s own playing, (4) unambiguous feedback and (5) concentration on the task at hand, where one’s mind must be completely focussed on the activity to such an extent that one cannot be distracted, (6) sense of control to such an extent that failure is not a concern, (7) loss of self-consciousness and how other people perceive you, (8) transformation of time, (9) and autotelic experience where one performs the activity simply for the experience itself.

Program:

Violin Sonata No. 5 in F major, Op. 24

L. van Beethoven

1770-1827

Ludwig van Beethoven's Violin Sonata No. 5 in F major, Op. 24, commonly known as the "Spring" Sonata, is one of the composer's early masterpieces. Composed in 1801, this sonata portrays a sense of freshness and lyrical beauty, qualities that earned it its nickname. The work is structured in four movements, each showcasing a seamless interplay between the violin and piano, with themes that are both elegant and exuberant.

"I love it when the people are quiet when you play a slow movement - when you can hear a pin drop. That to me is flow: When people are very quiet. I played in a little church once. I played four or five recitals in two weeks, but different music. It was crazy, but I was so young still. I played a second movement of a Beethoven Sonata, and I think I made myself cry. You know, when people come to you, it is easy to make them like something very fast and flashy, but I think it is very difficult to get into people's hearts with slow movements. So, to me it is almost a goal; to really tell a story with a slow piece, that is not flashy. Those moments that I remember."

- Participant

Danse Orientale

Rimsky-Korsakov

1844-1908

Transcribed by F. Kreisler

1875-1962

Rimsky-Korsakov's orchestral suite "Scheherazade," composed in 1888, is based on the stories of "Scheherazade", the legendary storyteller from the collection of Middle Eastern folktales known as "One Thousand and One Nights", and is perhaps the most famous musical portrayal of these tales, vividly bringing to life the adventures and mystique of the ancient Orient.

Kreisler's composition, "Danse Orientale", inspired by Rimsky-Korsakov's work, shares a similar spirit of evoking the exotic and the mysterious. The "Danse Orientale" can be seen as a musical reproduction of

Scheherazade's enchanting stories, containing the same sense of wonder and fantasy. Through its twisting melodies and rich harmonies, the piece conjures images of lavish palaces, bustling bazaars, and the intriguing world of the East.

"I have experienced flow many times, and all my life I've been searching how to experience it again. It is a very difficult question. As a concert master, I remember when the conductor, Micheal Dudzinski, came and we played Sheherezade. I will never forget that concert. There was a type of flow which went through the whole audience, orchestra and everyone. I felt that that's that. Nothing can ever be better. My solos and everything went perfectly. I asked myself how do you reach that type of energy which flows through you. But now I know how you reach that; with a lot of work and a lot of experience!" – Participant

Sonata in A major for Violin and Piano

C. Franck

1822-1890

César Franck's Violin Sonata in A Major, composed in 1886, stands as one of the most celebrated works in the violin and piano repertoire. Dedicated to the famous Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe as a wedding present, this sonata is a masterful example of Franck's compositional success and his ability to blend lyricism with formal innovation.

The sonata is structured in four movements, each contributing to the overall emotional and thematic coherence of the work. In the first movement, a peaceful and sensuous dreamscape is set by the loving companionship of the violin and piano lines. The second movement introduces a ghostly scherzo in D minor, creating images of dark waves and haunting shadows. The contemplative third movement bears a feeling of hazy improvisation, searching, and remembering. The theme builds until the final movement, where the search finally ends with the ultimate resolution. The dark clouds disappear, and the sunny main theme soars in a canon between the violin and piano.

"I can remember playing in Russia in 1994 with a Russian pianist. In one of the piano interludes in the Franck violin sonata he played so incredibly beautiful that I literally got goosebumps. I was so captivated by his playing that I almost missed my entry. That component of performing with other people, and it is not just the people, it is not just that you are participating in a communal experience in another personality, it is also that you are combining with another musical personality. That is just amazing to me. That is one of the absolutely critical factors in experiencing flow." – Participant



Carli D'Alebout

(24895350)

(Violin)

(1CK R01 L901P)

Concert recital for the
partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Music with Music Performance
in the Faculty of Arts
(School of Music)
of the North-West University,
Potchefstroom Campus.

Promoter: Prof. Piet Koornhof

Afrikaanse Hoër Seunskool Ouditorium

19 Mei 2024

11:00

Accompanist: Leandra Mans

This concert forms an integrated whole with my formal assignment for the Doctor of Music qualification, titled “Exploring Five Professional Violinists’ Flow Experiences During Solo and Chamber Music Performances.”

It is required that two of my four performances must form an integrated whole with my formal assignment. I created this integration by choosing my repertoire for the two performances based on my findings from the interviews conducted. Five professional violinists were asked about their flow experiences during performances, and from the list of repertoire in which they experienced flow, I then chose my programs for the two performances.

The goal of my performances is not to achieve flow as the participants did, but rather to pay tribute to their experiences by reflecting on the conditions, contexts, and stories of their flow experiences in these program notes.

Flow is a term established by the Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and can be described as an optimal experience in which the psychological state of being fully engaged in the pursuit of an activity is experienced so intensely that nothing else matters (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990:14). Flow is also described as “the holistic sensation that people feel when they act in total involvement (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000:36), being “in the zone”, and is similar to “peak experience” and “optimal experience” (Tan and Sin, 2020:36). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) developed nine ways in which to construct flow. Based on these dimensions, flow is (1) a challenge-skill balance, where one’s skill must be sufficient to support the challenges presented by the activity, (2) action-awareness merging, meaning one must be certain what one’s actions lead to, (3) having clear goals and knowing instantaneously how well one is doing. In other words, immediately be able to objectively judge one’s own playing, (4) unambiguous feedback and (5) concentration on the task at hand, where one’s mind must be completely focussed on the activity to such an extent that one cannot be distracted, (6) sense of control to such an extent that failure is not a concern, (7) loss of self-consciousness and how other people perceive you, (8) transformation of time, (9) and autotelic experience where one performs the activity simply for the experience itself.

Program

Fratres

Arvo Pärt
1953-

Arvo Pärt's "Fratres" is an influential work that has captivated audiences since its composition in 1977. Pärt, an Estonian composer known for his unique minimalist style, describes his music as "tintinnabuli," inspired by mystical chant music. "Fratres" is an example of this approach, featuring a slow, meditative quality. The structure of "Fratres" is built on a series of variations over a fixed sequence of chords. The use of simple triads and repetitive patterns evokes a sense of ancient, sacred music, reflecting Pärt's deep interest in early music and Gregorian chant. The piece's cyclic nature, with its recurring themes and variations, mirrors the concept of eternity and the interconnectedness of all things, a central theme in Pärt's work. Pärt's "Fratres" is not just a piece of music, but an experience of quiet reflection and spiritual depth.

Pezzo elegiaco

Balys Dvarionas

Scherzino

1904-1972

Elegia canzonetta

Adagio

Meditation

Impromptu

Balys Dvarionas was a distinguished Lithuanian composer, pianist, and conductor, whose work played a crucial role in shaping the cultural landscape of 20th-century Lithuania. Renowned for his lyrical and melodically rich compositions, Dvarionas adeptly incorporated Lithuanian folk elements into classical forms, creating a unique and nationalistic musical voice. Beyond his compositional achievements, Dvarionas was a dedicated educator and influential conductor, significantly contributing to the development of Lithuania's orchestral and educational institutions. His legacy endures through the continued performance of his music and the lasting impact he had on Lithuanian musical heritage. These six short pieces for violin and piano are not well known, but still takes the performer and audience on a beautiful journey filled with emotion and fantasy.

"Last night, I happened to come across a video recording of a recital I played. Out of curiosity, I listened to parts of it, having completely forgotten that I had the video. I remembered that I definitely experienced flow during certain parts, even if not for the entire performance. On the

program were, among others, Arvo Pärt's Fratres, along with a collection of short pieces by Balys Dvarionas. Specifically, in some of the Dvarionas, I enjoyed playing very much. It wasn't flawless. I could hear that I had some "sound slips" here and there. However, I could see my body language in the video, which reminded me that I felt I was losing myself for considerable lengths of time. This also relates to ensemble playing. I had a very good rapport with the pianist, who plays exceptionally well. I must say, that it helps a lot; it's one of the reasons why I enjoy ensemble playing so much. When you have a good rapport with the people you're playing with, it's much easier to lose yourself in the music and play through your colleague in a way, resulting in eliminating the feeling that you're a soloist on stage. It was so enjoyable to play with someone who plays so well and beautifully. It sweeps you along, and that's why I think it's important to play with people who are really top-notch, even better than yourself. For me, it's never intimidating. In a certain sense, it might be a bit intimidating, but musically, in terms of the overall experience, it's not intimidating to play with someone who is top-notch. It feels like it elevates you to a greater whole, and that is very enjoyable." - Participant

Violin Concerto in E minor, Op. 64.
Andante

F. Mendelssohn
1809-1847

Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E minor is a cornerstone of the violin repertoire, celebrated for its technical brilliance, lyrical beauty, and emotional depth. Composed in 1844, it remains one of the most beloved and frequently performed violin concertos in the classical repertoire. The concerto consists of three movements.

The second movement unfolds with a lyrical and tender violin melody. Marked by its graceful elegance and poignant lyricism, this Adagio movement invites the listener into a world of serene reflection and heartfelt expression. Mendelssohn's gift for melody is on full display here, as the music ebbs and flows with a sense of intimate dialogue between soloist and accompaniment. In its exploration of themes of love, loss, and longing, the second movement of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto stands as a testament to the composer's gift for crafting music of profound emotional resonance.

"A couple of months ago I played in concert outside and it was really, really cold, but I still had a lot of fun. I played a whole concerto, but it was badly organised, and I don't think anybody saw me. It was, however, outside in the field so it was still a nice experience and still an opportunity. I just feel like a different person when I start playing. If everything works, it is just great, especially when the sound that I was always looking for when I practiced, finally comes out" – Participant

Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 77

J. Brahms

Adagio

1833-1897

Brahms' Violin Concerto renowned for its emotional depth, technical challenges, and symphonic scope stands as a monumental work in the violin repertoire. Composed in 1878, it represents a pinnacle of Brahms' output and remains one of the greatest works of the Romantic concerto tradition. The second movement is a beautiful Adagio, characterised by its lyrical charm and introspective mood. The solo violin enters with a heartfelt melody that is both intimate and expansive. The music unfolds with a sense of emotional depth and poignancy. The movement's serene atmosphere offers a moment of respite from the intensity of the first movement, inviting the listener into a world of quiet contemplation and deeply felt emotion.

"Performance anxiety can stop flow, but I think that flow can eventually override the anxiety. I believe it is possible. I experience anticipation anxiety before a concert. Up to three days before the concert, I start feeling stressed. When I get to the concert, I try to allow the freedom to flow through, and then the flow takes over from the anxiety. So, I think the flow can become stronger than the anxiety. It feels like a blessing when that happens, a special grace that comes over you. When you manage to achieve that, it is like a gift. I am very relieved when that happens. I have often experienced conflicting feelings, especially before big performances, like when I played the Brahms Concerto for the first time. There would be high anxiety because it is new, big, and scary, and at the same time, I would experience a huge awareness of the depth and beauty of the music. The depth and beauty are where you connect to flow. When you go into the emotions of the music, that helps me access flow. It can be a real rocky road between anxiety, and the desire and dream to play this piece in a certain way and let it soar, like the second movement of the Brahms. There is always a fluctuation between anxiety and flow, but I think the awareness of flow as a desire for the performance helps me overcome the anxiety because it takes my attention away from just being anxious to thinking that maybe I can attain flow. I can go into the music and get rid of this anxiety. Flow can help." – Participant

Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47

J. Sibelius

Adagio di molto

1865-1957

Sibelius' Violin Concerto is a captivating work that was composed in 1903. Sibelius developed his own distinctive style, characterised by lush orchestration, rich harmonies, and a sense of national identity. He drew inspiration from Finnish folk music, mythology, and nature, elements that would become hallmarks of his later compositions. The second movement is a lyrical Adagio, giving opportunity for the solo violin to sing out a soulful melody over a shimmering orchestral backdrop. The movement's quiet intensity builds to a climax of breathtaking beauty before subsiding into a hushed conclusion

"I heard the introduction and soared into the opening of the second movement of Sibelius' violin concerto. As my bow descended onto the strings, I felt as if I was lifted up into the air. Sound flew from my violin and filled the old theatre. From the moment I started playing, I escaped to a place where it was possible and safe to wear my heart on my sleeve. I was absolutely consumed with emotion. I believe I felt Sibelius' lament and struggle. He longed his entire life to belong somewhere. Being a South African studying abroad in Norway, I also longed to feel like I belonged and was accepted. During the performance, I poured all my heart, fears, uncertainty, anger and love into that moment – not my playing. It was as if it was a whole experience, not a performance. It was raw, honest and unpretentious. It was an exhilarating moment where I was entirely present. I did not try to do or say anything. The moment just consumed me completely – as if it had accepted me." - Participant

ADDENDUM E: LANGUAGE EDITING



UNIVERSITEIT • STELLENBOSCH • UNIVERSITY
jou kennisvenoot • your knowledge partner

26 May 2024

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This is to confirm that I assisted Ms **C. D'Alebout** (Student number: 24895350) with the language editing and proofreading of her formal assignment for the degree *Doctor of Philosophy in Music Performance* at the North-West University while she was preparing the draft manuscript for submission. The title of the thesis: **Exploring five professional violinists' flow experiences during solo and chamber music performances: An interpretative phenomenological analysis**. Promoter: Prof. Liesl van der Merwe.

I went through the thesis manuscript making corrections and suggestions with respect to language usage. Given the nature of the process, I did not see the final version and I restricted my editing to language issues, but I remained available for consultation as long as necessary.

I may be contacted at the number/address below for further information or confidential confirmation.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'E. Hees', with a horizontal line drawn underneath.

Dr Edwin Hees
(Associate Professor Emeritus)
University of Stellenbosch
Private Bag X1
Matieland 7602
Cell: 076 977 7742
eph@sun.ac.za

ADDENDUM F: INVITATION TO PARTICIPANTS

Proposed email for the recruitment of subjects

Good day Mr/Mrs ...

It is with great excitement that I would kindly like to invite you to participate in my research for my Doctorate of Music studies at the North West University. The topic of my study is *Exploring five professional violinists' flow experiences during solo and chamber music performances* and I would love to hear about your personal experiences through an online interview of about an hour.

It would be a privilege for me to hear your stories about this thrilling topic.

Please let me know if you are keen to participate. If so, I will gladly send you detailed information about the rest of the process.

Kind regards,
Carli D'Alebout