

A Commentary on Expert Musicians and Practice in *The Psychology of Creative Performance and Expertise* by Kathryn Friedlander

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The *Psychology of Creative Performance and Expertise* is a thorough survey of creativity in the research literature. In this book, Kathryn Friedlander (2024) addresses questions fundamental to every branch of creative expertise: How does a practitioner of a creative task feel, think, and behave, and how did that come to be? It is both expansive and an enjoyable read.

Expertise is, by many measurements, domain specific. That is, the methodologies and benchmarks used to identify artist-level violinists are different than the methodologies and benchmarks used to identify experts in baseball. This is perhaps one reason aspiring artists may not want violin lessons from Shohei Ohtani. The complex constellation of aptitudes, memory, perceptions, thoughts, and behaviors, which affords an expert musician the ability to play beautifully and accurately on demand, is specific not just to the domain of music making, but also to the instrument or voice that individuals use to express themselves through music and the style of music they specialize in.

The domain-specific features of expertise have become the centerpiece of much pedagogy in aspiring artists' study of music. Although some musicians take classes in what are considered to be generalizable components of music skill such as music theory, music form, and aural skills, the bulk of instrumental and vocal expertise is widely

thought among musicians to be the result of learning from masters¹ of their specific craft.

There are many instances of music learning steeped in the paradigm where a master musician serves as the gatekeeper for knowledge (and skill) that is bestowed upon an apprentice student, yet this paradigm is not without costs. The reliance on the master-apprentice relationship has allowed for systemic exclusionary practices that make the knowledge of masters available only to some. To this point, Friedlander (p. 154) highlights the gender bias that persists among major orchestras, suggesting the insidiousness of systemic gatekeeping practices.

This text outlines a path forward for aspiring artists that goes beyond hero worship, into a more interesting and complicated landscape—one built on patterns in human learning and behavior that transcend any one domain, let alone one human being. Because, as Part 1 of this text details so comprehensively, the *development* of expertise is not domain specific. The comprehensive body of research reviewed in *The Psychology of Creative Performance and Expertise* connects the striking and important commonalities (e.g., aptitudes, practice, environmental factors, opportunity) in the ways expertise instantiates and emerges *across* creative domains.

In Chapter 6, “*Musical Expertise*,” Friedlander takes care to cite research not just from the study of expert western art music performance, integrating studies from other

branches of creativity in music like folk and pop music, composition, conducting, and improvising. Many studies cited in this chapter are also from recent research. The study of expertise has expanded rapidly in the past two decades, and this text admirably synthesizes research from a wide spectrum of sources, many published in the past five years. Similarly, up-to-date musical expertise references draw comparisons between historical masters that have dominated the canon and music study (e.g., Mozart, Bach) with living musicians that bear the hallmarks of historical mastery (e.g., Derek Paravicini, Alma Deutscher), making the text feel relevant and alive.

I specifically appreciate the small but mighty section exploring the apparent unenjoyable-ness that Ericsson (1993) proposed as a feature of deliberate practice. As a musician who has (to my best, current estimate) spent more than 20,000 hours of life practicing individually, this largely resonates with my experience and that of many of my peers. In a lifetime of practice, for many musicians, there are moments, and hours, and days that we may find frustrating and boring. Why would a self-aware, aspiring expert willingly choose to begin and sustain an unenjoyable activity? The answer is that this drudgery is not best understood as an uninterrupted period of unhappiness. It is better described as the iterative reaching of (sometimes exceedingly) proximal goals that lead to small changes in perception, thought, and behavior. Over (occasionally unenjoyable) time, those changes accumulate and interact, leading to highly rewarding musical performances that were once undoable for the aspiring expert. Like pigeons in boxes, expert musicians learn to toil, eventually for hours at a time, trusting that their practice will end in beautiful music.

Searching for the common ground among creative music endeavors, Friedlander makes an admirable attempt at describing what, for many musicians, is difficult to describe: “musicality.” Although musicality is typically discussed in gauzy terms relating to the aesthetic experience, this text takes a person-centered view, identifying the acuities and skills that typically underlie the behaviors of musicians that play with musicality.

What is missing from this chapter is a discussion of what musicians actually do when they practice. How is it that expert musicians behave to instantiate and refine procedural memories that afford them more beautiful and expressive music? Although much of the research in music practice aims to identify the goals that guide what great musicians “focus on” or perhaps “work on” during practice, the decision-making underlying moment-to-moment behavior is central to expert practice and is often left unmentioned in the body of literature reviewed in this chapter.

For at least two reasons, Chapter 14 (“*Navigating Obstacles*”) should be required reading in conservatories and other spaces where nascent experts toil. First, with a review of research documenting what Friedlander calls parsimoniously, “The penalty of being female” (p. 372), this chapter shines light on the systemic gender biases underpinning the underrepresentation of women in creative performance. This review should serve as an invaluable resource for the evolution of policy and pedagogy in creative domains. Second, Friedlander paints a helpful and detailed portrait of the challenging physiological and psychological landscape of expertise. Sampling a diverse array of research on the topic, this chapter explores the effects of myriad factors that influence, overlap with, and challenge the development of expertise. For example, anxiety, burnout, and imposter syndrome likely pervade the lives of most aspiring musicians at some point in their journey, inhibiting skill development and stifling well-being. Our entire community would benefit from a better understanding of these challenges, how they come to be, and importantly, how they can be avoided.

This text is an undeniably valuable addition to the study of expertise. I look forward to using it in the classroom.

Endnote

1. The term “master” is used here differently than in Hoffman’s (2017) final stage of expertise, where “masters” attain greatness and legendary status. In colloquial usage, “master” more likely describes what Hoffman may label an “expert.”

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