

Music and Motivation

There is a wonderful study, conducted at St Andrews University, which highlights the sometimes counterintuitive nature of human motivation. It is laid out as follows:

A group of children and a group of chimpanzees are shown a box and a complicated series of actions required to retrieve a treat from it. Both the children and the chimps are able to replicate this ritual to reliably get the sweet with similar skill. The difference comes in when a panel is pulled back to reveal that the ritual was completely unnecessary and that the treat can be retrieved directly. The surprising outcome of this experiment is that the chimpanzees forego the ritual at this point, skipping directly to the treat they were after, but the children (despite being told that it is not required) continue to act out the entire sequence before retrieving their reward.

Perhaps this outcome should not be surprising after all, but it does have profound implications for the understanding of why we enjoy listening to music, an act which has little apparent direct benefit at all. For human beings, it would appear, what is really valuable is not the reward, but the puzzle itself. The harvest is at least as rewarding as tilling the soil. What's more, brain studies of musical appreciation indicate that it is exactly this sort of joy that is involved when we listen to music. This very thing is also the source of the so called "Mozart" effect, it has nothing whatsoever with Mozart's music and everything to do with mood enhancing properties of "solving the puzzle" of music. People do better on intelligence tests when they are in a better mood, and if listening to Industrial Rock makes you happy it is exactly as effective as Mozart for the purpose of enhancing your score on an I.Q. test.

<http://youtu.be/AUT9UTVrwp8>

If that explains why we enjoy (and hence be motivated to engage in) listening to music, it doesn't explain why we should go to all the effort of practicing it. Certainly practicing scales for what seems like endless hours is not a rewarding puzzle to be solved, it is an awful hassle.

Fortunately, psychologists studying motivation have an answer here too. When the task is simple a simple extrinsic reward *does* greatly enhance performance. The trick is that the extrinsic reward in the case of music is (or should ideally be), the joy of being able to play music well.

This sets up a kind of feedback loop: The more you practice, the easier it becomes to play pieces well, and being able to play pieces well is rewarding in itself, a reward that encourages you to practice more.

Ideally this is how musical education should work, but in the real world the joy of holding a distinction certificate from a recognized exam body also helps to drive practice. In the short term this kind of extrinsic reward can be very useful, and lead to a much faster attainment of key technical disciplines. However, it is worth pointing out that a long deep understanding

and involvement with the music itself (as opposed to the competition and exam culture that arises from it) is almost never the outcome of this approach. As a musician I would personally seriously question the value of such an outcome, others may not.

One thing worth noting, though, is that one sure to destroy motivation entirely is to attempt to do music “for fun”. Practicing music is not in itself rewarding, and no amount of sugar coating will make it so. On the other hand, the reward from practicing music, whether that is the certificate or the intrinsic joy of making music, can only ever be reached through practice. If you go to music lessons expecting to have fun the one thing you can expect not to have is fun. Going to the cinema is fun, music lessons are hard work that makes having fun possible. Unfortunately there is no shortcut.