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Self-Regulated Practice and Technical Consolidation in Trumpet Performance: An Autoethnographic Doctoral Study

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Abstract

This article explores the evolution of trumpet performance through the consolidation of self-regulated practice, understood not merely as a set of strategies but as a reorientation of attention, perception, and embodied musical experience. Drawing upon a multi-year doctoral process documented through journals, performance chronologies, and lived encounters with teachers and colleagues, the study narrates how a musician burdened by years of over-analysis, technical rigidity, and psychological pressure gradually reconfigured his practice through inner hearing, non-anxious repetition, and emotional regulation. The narrative is framed within established scholarship on self-regulated learning (Zimmerman), deliberate practice (Ericsson et al.), phenomenology of musical experience (Small; Benson), and practice-as-research in the arts (Barrett & Bolt; Borgdorff). Through this lens, the article argues that technical consolidation emerges not from muscular control or intellectual understanding alone but from the sustained cultivation of attentive, embodied listening. The findings contribute a pedagogical model in which repetition becomes refinement rather than correction, error becomes meaningful information, and inner hearing becomes the organizing principle of motor coordination. Ultimately, the study demonstrates how self-regulated practice can reshape not only technique but the very experience of making music.

Keywords: Self-regulated practice; trumpet performance; deliberate practice; embodied listening; inner hearing; phenomenology of musical experience; practice-as-research; motor coordination in music.

Abstract (Spanish)

Este artículo explora la evolución de la interpretación trompetística a través de la consolidación de la práctica autorregulada, entendida no simplemente como un conjunto de estrategias, sino como una reorientación de la atención, la percepción y la experiencia musical encarnada. Basándose en un proceso doctoral de varios años documentado mediante diarios, cronologías de interpretación y encuentros vividos con profesores y colegas, el estudio narra cómo un músico, cargado durante años por el exceso de análisis, la rigidez técnica y la presión psicológica, reconfiguró gradualmente su práctica mediante la audición interna, la repetición sin ansiedad y la regulación emocional.

La narración se enmarca en los estudios consolidados sobre aprendizaje autorregulado (Zimmerman), práctica deliberada (Ericsson et al.), fenomenología de la experiencia musical (Small; Benson) y práctica-como-investigación en las artes (Barrett & Bolt; Borgdorff). Desde esta perspectiva, el artículo sostiene que la consolidación técnica no surge únicamente del control muscular o de la comprensión intelectual, sino del cultivo sostenido de una escucha atenta y encarnada.

Los hallazgos aportan un modelo pedagógico en el que la repetición se convierte en refinamiento en lugar de corrección, el error se transforma en información significativa y la audición interna pasa a ser el principio organizador de la coordinación motora. En última instancia, el estudio demuestra cómo la práctica autorregulada puede remodelar no solo la técnica, sino la propia experiencia de hacer música.

Palabras clave: práctica autorregulada; interpretación de trompeta; práctica deliberada; escucha encarnada; audición interna; fenomenología de la experiencia musical; práctica-como-investigación; coordinación motora en la música.

Introduction

To learn an instrument is to inhabit a paradox: one seeks control, yet the deepest forms of musical fluency arise when control softens into listening. Trumpet players often find themselves negotiating between the desire for technical mastery and the free-flowing experience of performing.. This tension defined much of my own musical journey. For years, I attempted to solve technical issues, especially the instability in the initial attack, through analysis, effort, and multiplicity of concepts. What resulted was not mastery, but exhaustion: a practice dominated by intellectual effort, emotional pressure, and a constant sense of insufficiency. This article tells the story of how that changed.

It is an autoethnographic study grounded in my doctoral experience, where performance, reflection, and theory gradually converged into a new form of practice. The transformation did not happen through a single insight, but through the accumulation of a diversity of small moments: a lesson with a teacher; music challenges that stressed my method; an audition preparation; the relationship with a community of musicians.

Although this text explains my personal experience, it dialogues with the frameworks of musical learning. Zimmerman's conception of self-regulated learning, understood as a cycle. Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer's understanding of expert performance. Phenomenological perspectives (Small, 1998; Benson, 2003) explain the necessity of grounding musical action. And practice-as-research literature (Barrett & Bolt, 2007; Borgdorff, 2012) affirmed that the knowledge emerging from practice is not secondary but constitutive of artistic inquiry.

The purpose of this article is not to present a method in the prescriptive sense, but to articulate how technical consolidation emerged from the self-regulated cycle. In tracing this trajectory, I aim to offer trumpet players, teachers, and researchers a model of self-regulated practice based in lived experience, phenomenological awareness, and reflective analysis.

Methods

The methodology of this study is intrinsically bound to the nature of the artistic process it examines. It is grounded in autoethnography: the recognition that the performer's lived experience constitutes valid research data. During my years of academic training, I kept a critical performance journal, collecting handwritten notes, recorded lessons, practice reflections, and analyses of rehearsals and concerts. These materials form the core dataset for the present study.

As practice-as-research, performance itself acts as both method and evidence. Concerts, recitals, and auditions were not merely outcomes of study but experiences where concepts were tested under pressure. The reflective writing that followed each event created a cycle in which action informed reflection and reflection re-informed action.

The analysis draws upon:

- performance chronologies during 2009–2025,
- daily journal entries documenting technical focus, emotional states, and self-assessment scores,
- video and audio recordings of performances,
- conversations with teachers such as Vicente Costa, Jordi Albert, Alexander Freund, and Caleb Hudson,
- and observations of peers within professional and academic ensembles.

The theoretical frameworks guiding interpretation include Zimmerman's (2002) model of self-regulated learning, phenomenological analyses of musical experience (Small, 1998; Benson, 2003), and pedagogical studies on repetition (Saville, 2011) and mindful regulation (Papageorgi et al., 2007; Kotamjani et al., 2025).

Results

Before the Change: Effort Without Ease

For more than a decade, my practice orbit remained locked around a central anxiety: the fear of failing the initial attack. This single technical difficulty permeated every aspect of my playing. It shaped my breathing, narrowed my attention, and often triggered muscular over-control. Learning trumpet with orthodontics during adolescence shaped my embouchure and, after finishing the treatment. Without the brackets I kept my compensatory habits that later solidified into tensions.

At this stage, my practice was intensely analytical. I attempted to understand every gesture conceptually, thinking that understanding and analyzing what my body was doing would result in a better coordination. Yet the more I analyzed, the stiffer and more ineffective my technique became. Even powerful conceptual frameworks, particularly those learned from Jordi Albert, who emphasized inner hearing, global sensation, and natural coordination, were absorbed into an intellectualized practice that deprived them of their experiential power.

Emotionally, this period was heavy. Error was a source of self-judgment. Improvement appeared, but rarely persisted; progress would dissolve under the pressure of analysis. As Ericsson et al. (1993) warn, deliberate practice is effective only when carefully regulated, yet mine was a laboratory of cognitive overload. I worked hard, but inefficiently, investing time in ways that drained my energy rather than consolidating ability.

What I did not yet understand was that my difficulty was not primarily technical, it was perceptual and emotional. I was seeking certainty through control, rather than stability through listening.

Revelation: When Repetition Became Listening

The turning point emerged unexpectedly in 2024 while preparing the *Brandenburg Concerto No. 2* and, soon after, the audition for the Orquesta Sinfónica de Yucatán. These were situations of extreme technical and psychological demand. There was no margin for obsessive exploration. Something had to change.

The revelation was simple, almost disconcertingly so: I only needed to repeat calmly until the sound aligned with the inner image. This is how many music students understand the process. However, after years of analytical effort made me distrust simplicity. Underlying the simplicity was something far more profound: a change in attitude.

Repetition, which for years had been mechanical or punitive, became a space of attentive refinement. Instead of searching obsessively for the correct coordination, I allowed each attempt to inform the next. Between repetitions I paused, released residual air, breathed without tension, and returned to the inner sound before playing. This small cycle, listen, attempt, breathe, listen again, produced improvements that analysis had never achieved.

In less than two weeks, my attacks stabilized. The sound began to resonate more freely. The mid and low registers, historically unreliable, gained a solidity I had not experienced before. techniques I had practiced for years suddenly started to “sound” with surprising ease when the action was guided by the inner hearing rather than muscular or physical supervision.

Meditation techniques, which I had practiced outside of music, became the very first step into my practice. As studies on stress and learning indicate (Papageorgi et al., 2007; Kotamjani et al., 2025), emotional regulation enhances cognitive and motor performance. A brief breathing sequence before playing recalibrated my attention and relaxed the emotional burden that had accumulated through years of having bad results.

I began to perceive something essential: the body when playing, does not respond to thoughts; it responds to the quality of listening.

Consolidation: When the Method Became habit

By 2025, self-regulated practice had become the architecture of my daily work rather than a technique I applied intentionally. The consolidation phase was marked not by dramatic revelations but by the quiet stability that emerged across very different musical environments.

Touring and performing with M5 Mexican Brass, preparing *Rhapsody in Blue* for performances in Spain, and presenting my DMA Recitals all became tests of whether the new approach held under pressure.

Across these months, I noticed several transformations:

Repetition had become non-anxious. Attempts were informed by listening, not urgency.

Error lost its emotional charge. It revealed information rather than deficiency.

Inner hearing grew richer. I imagined not only pitch or timbre, but resonance, attack, and the acoustic response of the hall.

Breathing organized movement. Instead of preparing to avoid failure, breath prepared the body to allow sound.

Practice felt lighter. Even though the number of hours remained the same, the feeling or attitude was completely the opposite.

Interpretation deepened. With less attention consumed by technical fear, musical phrasing expanded.

These changes reflected what phenomenological theorists emphasize: musical technique is not a set of mechanical actions but a lived experience where intention, perception, and action form a single continuum. In Small's terms, I was no longer merely playing music—I was musicking, inhabiting a sonic space shaped from within.

Discussion

This new approach to my trumpet practice confirms that technical consolidation cannot be separated from the way a musician listens. Inner hearing emerged as the central mechanism of improvement: when the imagined sound became vivid and complete, the body found ways to realize it through repetition. When the sound image was vague, coordination fragmented into tension or paralysis.

This idea aligns with Albert's (2017) work on expert motor practice in trumpet performance, as well as with the broader literature on musical cognition, which describes listening (inner hearing) as the organizing principle of instrumental action.

Furthermore, the reframing of repetition proved transformative. Saville (2011) notes that learning accelerates when repetition is coupled with immediate feedback and emotional neutrality. My experience confirms this: effective repetition is not mechanical but mindful; it does not seek perfection but alignment.

The emotional dimension of self-regulation was equally crucial. Years of associating error with deficiency, instead of feedback, produced a difficult relationship with practice. Through meditation, breathing strategies, and the intentional softening of judgment, I learned to practice

with neutral emotions rather than fear. This shift supported technical consistency as much as any physical technique could.

Finally, the use of a practice journal, recordings, and self-assessment scales created a reflective cycle like Zimmerman's (2002) model. Practice ceased to be a linear activity and became cyclical, and became cyclical: a dialogue between intention, action, interpretation, repetition.

As an autoethnographic study, the findings emerge from a single performer's process and should be interpreted as lived insight rather than generalized claim.

Conclusions

The transformation described in this article reveals that self-regulated practice is not simply a pedagogical approach but a reconfiguration of the musician's relationship with sound, difficulty, and self. Technical consolidation did not arise from discovering a new technique but from recovering a different way of listening, one attentive, calm, embodied, and deeply musical.

Several conclusions emerge:

- Inner hearing is the first step of sounding. When the sound is clear inside, coordination aligns without force.
- Repetition becomes powerful when freed from anxiety. Calm cycles of listening and attempting build stability that analysis alone cannot.
- Error is pedagogical. Reframed not as threat but as feedback, it guides refinement rather than fear.
- Breathing is emotional and physical regulation. It connects intention with action and grounds practice in the body.
- Self-regulated practice is sustainable. It adapts to daily conditions, supports long-term development, and fosters artistic autonomy.
- The performer becomes a researcher. Through journaling, analysis, and reflection, performance becomes a site of knowledge creation.

The outcome is not a method, but a way of improving practice and learning, one that integrates rigor with ease, awareness with repetition, analysis with intuition. In this sense, self-

regulated practice becomes not only a tool for trumpet performance but a philosophy of learning, a way to approach sound, body, and artistic life with clarity and presence.

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