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**BASIC STRESS-MANAGEMENT IN PIANO PERFORMANCE, COMPOSING AND  
IMPROVISING**

Based on personal experiences and self-reflection

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Bachelor's Thesis  
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Degree programme in Music, Option of  
Musician  
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## ABSTRACT

Oulu University of Applied Sciences  
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Basic stress-management in piano performance, composing and improvising

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There is a lot of information and it is not always easy to find the right bits, and to apply them. Therefore, stress-management in music world is underdeveloped. Musicians struggle in situations, where even basic psychophysical knowledge would already relieve the stress considerably. Thus, this paper aims to help musicians of all levels with as simple, universal, efficient stress-management tips as possible, without any medicine involved. The end aim is to help with the organization of personal creative life as optimally as it can be in any given personal circumstances, even if stress already occurred and has become chronic.

The research is based on my personal experience as a classical pianist, composer and, nowadays, also improviser. I will support my methods and discoveries with relevant reference to authoritative sources.

My results up-to-date, with using the stress-management described in this thesis, are: completing a ten-page variations (included in this thesis) based on a Depeche Mode song, already performed at my graduation piano exam together with a one-hour classical program, 46 piano improvisations recorded and published on YouTube under the name Keys of Fate, setting up a personal website [www.keys-of-fate.com](http://www.keys-of-fate.com), and last but not least, defining the nearest future music path to follow as a piano performer despite my history of personal challenges related to piano performing.

My only wish at this point is that stress-management based on wholesome psychophysiological methods is included into music education not only in short introductory courses, but also as a deep, ongoing and compulsory educational process throughout the study years.

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Keywords: stress management, music, piano performance, composing, improvising

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis would not be possible without the wisdom, kindness and endless patience of my mentor Igor Tunik. Thanks to him, I have returned to music and am now at a fresh start as a performing artist. Despite long history of stage fright, one of my fears, and a bunch of other personal life challenges, I continue and this time it is with more self-awareness than it has ever been in my life before. I am thus writing this work with sincere gratitude for us sharing a life.

Because self-reflection is the base of this thesis, all the unreferenced text is about my own experiences. I found what I believe is a reasonable amount of references to support the stress-management method I describe in the paper. However, the approach I am using seems to be unusual enough not to have other publications providing information on it – at least not in the freely available online sources and books I looked through. Also, as the thesis had been written in a relatively short period of time, most of the references are online articles and reports, with addition of exclusive interviews done personally by me earlier in my life time, when I had no idea this thesis would be happening.

Furthermore, I intentionally focus on body stress reaction and its management, dedicating only a short part of the thesis to my application of these methods in piano performance, composing and improvising – and very briefly touching the mind-related side of stress. Such approach of mine has to do with the applicability of the methods for anyone whose physiology works within the commonly accepted norms of healthiness. I believe understanding how stress works and getting the tools to manage it is important for anybody, because we, musicians, deal with many other people on our musical journey. Helping ourselves and others to fight oversteering and thus become better at what we do is my sincere wish and overall reason of this written work.

Finally, yet importantly, the section about piano performance, composing and improvising serves as my personal example of the productivity of my stress-management approach. These kinds of results are individual, therefore it is reasonable to let other readers learn to manage their stress better and pay attention to how *their life* is changing together with their new applied knowledge. The link between stress-management and me starting to compose, improvise and perform more than ever in my life is as follows: getting rid of unnecessary tensions in the body, I keep noticing the calming effects of this approach to my mind and overall feeling. Decreasing of the unnecessary

tensions frees the body-mind resources and, naturally, leads to increasing of the energy level – thus making me braver and wanting to do more. Because the overall level of stress goes down on everyday basis, I am able to achieve more with less effort – as less energy goes to supporting the unnecessary stress tensions in the body. The self-awareness training, a big part of my stress-management method, has been helping me to understand myself better as a person, musician and creator, to question and shape my life priorities according to my own genuine expectations, and to dedicate more focus on discovering, exploring and nurturing my talents according to those priorities – combined with the increased body awareness that is providing me with more and more tools for self-development.

### **1.1 The beginning of my stress-management training**

Until this day, I keep reminding myself how lucky I am to have been training stress-resilience with a specific technique since 2010. Having enrolled at the Traditional Wing Chun Academy in Ukraine, I am privileged to have become a student of Master Igor Tunik, a personal disciple of Grandmaster of Traditional Wing Chun (TWC) William Cheung, who himself was a student of the legendary TWC practitioner Ip Man and a peer and a teacher for even more legendary Bruce Lee (Grandmaster William Cheung, 2015). It was Tunik who designed a special stress-management method for everyday life and incorporated it into the Academy practice.

I have had stage fright for as long as I can remember. Combined with fear of failure, it made me quit studying music more than ten years ago. Thus, I earned a degree that I thought was suitable for “the real world.” Afterward, I worked for three years in various companies in my home county of Ukraine. Meeting Tunik was a life-changer: his psychophysical approach to handling stress, including life-threatening situations, introduced me to a world of self-awareness, where stress is a relatively simple phenomenon, easy to notice and take control of with consistent and regular training. However, for years, I was not sure how exactly I could apply his method my music activities – until one particular concert.

### **1.2 A concert gone extreme**

In June 2015, I was playing as a collaborative pianist in a course for amateur singers, many of whom were brave enough to take on professional repertoire like lied by Schubert and Schumann.

The course lasted throughout a week; a couple of hours each day plus my own practice for the course, plus rehearsing for another concert (with different program, lied and solo) scheduled right after the final public performance for the course singers. I had just moved to a different city; settling in was heavily underway. I thought I did my share of self-restoration, but it turned out I didn't realize how big challenge the whole situation was – new living place, no personal connections, no school routine schedules, no job yet, and not even an acoustic piano after the excellent infrastructure OAMK provided during the nearly three years prior to the relocation.

During the course week, for a number of reasons I did not get proper sleep, so the two hour-long course concert with surprises and extremely high level of concentration was already demanding. I was feeling unusually tired and low on energy. It worried me, as I was not sure why I was feeling that way. I knew that the second concert in such circumstances would not be easy, but I did not realize how bad my self-feeling was until my solo of two Passepied and Gigue from J.S.Bach's English Suite no.5. As I was going through the technical passages, my fingers started failing to respond, my mouth became dry, my pulse started beating loudly in my ears and I thought I was about to faint every other moment. And, the concert was only beginning, with more than a hundred people in the hall!

Overwhelmed by so sudden and unprecedentedly strong stress reaction on stage, I realized my only way to continue the performance: to use all I have learned, right there and then on the stage, right in the process of playing, if I still wanted to deliver as great experience as I could. Thus, I started using my breathing method, at the same time scanning body for unnecessary tensions and doing what I could to relieve them – all while following the music, the singer and filling the performance with relevant expression and feelings. This process required me paying attention to at least five different points – breathing, relaxing my body, looking at sheets, playing, and following the singer. Because I had trained the first two elements earlier during the Academy TWC trainings, it partially recreated a comfort zone for me and thus did not require much effort from me to use them on stage. We made it, and as the audience was thrilled, we performed an encore as requested. The singer had no idea I was on the verge of fainting for almost an hour until I told her, and no one from the audience noticed anything.

This story is my first personal music performance experience of how Tunik's stress-management training saved me during an extremely stressful situation in music. Moreover, it was a first-hand proof: the skills I learned with him are *simple enough to use right here and now in so scary condition*

*without thinking much, with minimal possible effort, and without stopping my activity.* Finally, yet importantly, after that concert the subject of this thesis was born. With Tunik's approval, I am sharing his method in this paper through my own experiences, according to his teaching – do not do as I say, but do as I do.

### **1.3 Misconceptions related to handling stress**

Stress-management in simple words means controlling fight-or-flight reaction. Being so basic of a skill, it applies equally to all people whose health is within the commonly accepted norms. If we all knew how to handle our stress reactions properly on a routine basis, without the need of special tools, complicated exercises, chemical substances, and were able to efficiently teach others in need, regardless of whether we are musicians or not, this paper would not be necessary.

The reality shows otherwise. When a student was scared to perform in public because he did not realize there would be large audience and did not dress fancy, his world-famous teacher told him minutes before the performance “to think happy thoughts” to relieve his stress. The advice did not work, and the student performed a lot worse than in the classroom during the lessons. The fellow musicians from the immediate surrounding know they have to relax, but when asked how, their explanations go to such lengths it makes one wonder if they understand the whole stress-relief and relaxation idea. Moreover, experienced music teachers talk about panic before concerts and, apparently, do not know that there are ways to relieve this particular kind of stress, if not avoid it altogether.

### **1.4 How the thesis is organized**

To make sure we all are on the same page throughout the discourse, I start from the global stress situation overview, then briefly explain the causes of stress, pinpoint the definition, go through the reaction itself, describe self-awareness, share Tunik's method of stress handling, and finish with the personal experiences of applied stress-management in interpretative piano performance, composing and improvising.



## 2 GLOBAL STRESS SITUATION OVERVIEW

Our world is changing globally at extraordinary speed. As a human race, we seem to be more successful with creating changes around ourselves than within. At least the stress reaction, apparently as old as the human kind itself, still seems to be ruling us more often than we rule it ourselves. We have come up with a fantastic number of ways to ignore it, to medicate it and to “cure it.” Googling “stress-management” gives 15 900 000 results in 0,57 seconds, and checking each source for credibility would make the number of used sites considerably higher.

Such attitude to our own selves has consequences we cannot ignore forever. As of October 6, 2016, Global Organization for Stress has stated: “In a recent global survey of 1,000 corporations across 15 countries, commissioned by The Regus Group it was found that the levels of workplace stress have risen over the last two years. The survey found 6 in 10 workers in significant global economies experienced increased workplace stress.” (2016.) The source also mentions: “These heightened stress levels were costing world economies billions of dollars in lost productivity and health related problems.” (2016.) Musicians, naturally, fall into these numbers just as people of all other professions in the world.

While there is a lot those global corporations can do to fight over-stressing, our stress reactions are our own, no matter how fast-changing and unpredictable our world may have become. Moreover, we have been wired to react in certain ways over thousands of years. Our current inability to change basic body functions at will, like most of us can move a hand or turn head, only confirms the fact that we still have a long journey of learning to manage ourselves, ahead of us. The good news is that, indeed, our stress reactions are our own, and the global development is providing us with more and more information on how we function. Therefore, it is all about picking the right bits of that information and learning to apply it in everyday life. In our case, we are interested in understanding what happens to us when we are distressed, and which part of that reaction we can control and manage in any situation self-reliantly.

## **3 WHAT IS STRESS?**

### **3.1 Defining stress**

The term “stress”, as it is currently used, was coined by Hans Selye in 1936, who defined it as “the non-specific response of the body to any demand for change”. (The American Institute of Stress, 2016). Furthermore, Tatiana Chernigovskaya, a Russian neuro-linguist and experimental psychologist, is one of the advocates of the theory that our brain has already decided all for us in advance – including our stress responses. (Fornit, 2016). This means that all our stress symptoms (feelings and emotions as well as body sensations) are a reaction to what is a reaction itself.

One of the modern user-friendly explanations of stress reaction can be found in the article “How stress affects your health” at the website of *American Psychological Association (APA)*, the leading scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the US. The explanation calls stress a “body’s natural alarm system” (2016), which is automatic and roots itself in the evolution of humankind as a self-preservation instinct. The days of escaping from predators are long since gone, but the stress response is so deeply rooted that it still works as designed: whenever we feel threat, clear or vague, strong or weak, real or imaginary, the stress reaction kicks in, and the stronger we perceive the threat, the stronger our reaction becomes.

### **3.2 The causes**

A number of musicians is familiar with stress – at least in the form of stage fright. The famous names include Maria Callas, Vladimir Horowitz, Paul McCartney and Barbara Streisand; even Frederic Chopin, a favorite among many modern performers and listeners, has been quoted as saying, “I am not fitted to give concerts. The audience intimidates me. I feel choked by its breath, paralyzed by its curious glances.” (Cox, 2015). It seems logical that a concert hall should not pose any more threat than a practice room. However, it is the difference in the surrounding itself that in this particular case triggers the good old “fight-or-flight” response. The reaction is common because, “There is a stigma of the unknown for the obvious reasons that we are not sure and we do not understand the consequences. Psychology research suggests we generally like to be able

to anticipate consequences.” (2015), according to Lindsay Hoffman, Professor of Communication and Political Science, University of Delaware writing in her article, “The Fear of Unknown.”

Moreover, there is a “puzzling limitation” to our own self-perception – “our excessive confidence in what we believe we know, and our apparent inability to acknowledge the full extent of our ignorance and the uncertainty of the world we live in.” (Kahneman, 2012). This means we tend to think everything around us is more predictable than it actually is, and whenever life goes differently from what we anticipate, it triggers the stress reactions because that’s how we work. Logically, each of us has their own set of those reactions, developed and changed throughout life – fear being one of them. “Fear is an emotional response induced by a perceived threat, which causes a change in brain and organ function, as well as in behavior.” (Niles, 2014). Just as there may be many emotional ways we respond to stress, there also are many instances we feel fear, and each can be different.

Fear is one of the strongest emotional reactions as it is directly related to our survival, thus we will devote a few sentences to them. “Fears can be tentatively grouped into two categories – imaginary and real. The former ones have been given to us from outside. For example, fear of world crisis. An example for the second group would be fear of losing one’s job. There is another way to group fears – psychological fears and those that arise from physiological causes. Psychological ones may be easier to change as they may be rooted in our social life. Physiological ones pose more of a challenge. For example, when a person gets a physical trauma and then is afraid of pain his or her whole life – all the next traumatic experiences pile up on top of the old one.” (Komarov, 2011.)

While people are able to cope with fears and everyday stress in small doses “by tapping into their body’s natural defenses to adapt to changing situations, excessive chronic stress, which is constant and persists over an extended period of time, can be psychologically and physically debilitating.” (American Psychological Association, 2016). Unlike everyday stressors, which can be managed with healthy stress management behaviors, untreated chronic stress can result in serious health conditions including anxiety, insomnia, muscle pain, high blood pressure and a weakened immune system (Baum & Poslusny, 1999).

Another common view is that mind and body are separate systems, connected in a specific way. Modern science is still heavily underway finding out whether each of us is a complete being with multiple aspects, or a number of relatively independent systems that work at the same time and

are interconnected as certain points. This kind of approach created many different ways to fight the “stress in your head” with methods like “think happy thoughts,” also doctrines of “mind over matter” kind, and similar attitudes to oneself as a separated being. I intentionally skip what could be otherwise a deep discussion about our body-mind as the method of this thesis is based on a wholesome self-perception. My numerous experiments with myself, as well as experiences with friends and colleagues who were testing the same stress-management approaches, have identical conclusions: tending to the body stress reaction takes care of the “mind stress” at the same time. Whereas I often find it a challenge to reason with strong emotions due to my highly temperamental character, focusing on the body and helping it to relax always brings an overall calming effect. After the acute stress reaction is taken care of, it is a lot easier to work on the reasoning, emotions, feelings, etc. Moreover, if you do the breathing and active relaxation, based on self-awareness, correctly, it will work whether you believe in the mind over body or the other way around. The only way, of course, is to test it yourself. The method is focused on the body *also because* it is easier to find common denominators with other people, who are mostly physiologically the same in their core, which is not the case at all with personal beliefs, emotional reactions and reasons behind them.

### **3.3 The body’s response**

The University of Maryland Medical Center’s website is one of the many sources explaining stress reaction in detail – which hormones get released, when and in which quantities, what happens to the blood, breathing, digestive, and immune systems, etc. Such information is helpful when one is curious to know what exactly is going on in all systems of our body. However, in practice we are interested in handling this process with the most benefits for us. For this interest, let us first describe the stress reaction with simple phrases, and then move on to what we can do with the reaction itself.

The following “simplified” explanation of stress reaction is taken from the PhD dissertation “Creating psychophysical conditions for developing critical evaluation skills for students of higher military education facilities” by Igor Tunik, Master of Martial Arts, Doctor of Psychology and a businessman. Since the original document has not been available to me at the time of writing this thesis, I have used the relevant information recorded through an online interview with Tunik, having translated and adapted the text into English with his permission.

“The evolution created for us three scenarios of active reaction to a threat: hide, run or attack. Whenever we feel threat – our brain automatically chooses one of the responses and the following chain of reactions rolls on:

- We hold up our breath for a fragment of a second, during which a large amount of adrenaline hormones is released into blood, which should help us to get focused and survive.
- In order to mobilize the whole body (read: each cell) as quickly as possible, our heart rate goes up.
- A person may still function normally when their stress reaction is mild, meaning when their pulse is 110-140 beats per minute.
- 140 - 180 heartbeats per minute is reaching the maximum of adequate perception of reality; movements and reaction slow down.
- Pulse above 180 beats per minute is usually the end of active reaction and beginning of stupor, where a person “freezes,” cannot move and often cannot remember what happened. In this condition, the survival instinct does not work.” (Tunik, 2013.)

From the practical point of view, this is all we need to know about stress: such process description gives us the base for developing a sturdy and wholesome basic stress-management, regardless of what exactly routine you may choose to build on top of it.

## 4 BASICS OF STRESS-MANAGEMENT

Whereas avoiding stress altogether is not possible (it is a natural response for any change in our lives), noticing it and taking care of it, before it becomes too much, is a vital skill. After all, feeling too much stress makes us feel helpless and out of control, so taking hold of what we actually can affect in our own body reactions is a significant stress-reliever in itself.

### 4.1 Learning to notice stress, or body-mind awareness

When my singing student colleague at OAMK Johanna Kropsu and I were conducting the *Creative Workshop* for basics of self-awareness and self-expression for our fellow OAMK students, my part was to facilitate self-awareness and teach basic stress-management. I learned the challenge of lack of self-awareness first-hand. How do you explain to someone unaware how exactly their body-mind is connected, that when they feel any kind of emotions, their heart rate is inevitably higher than normal, and there is excessive tension somewhere in the body?

It took me three workshop meetings with homework to demonstrate to each participant how their emotions and feelings show in their bodies, how those body sensations are similar regardless the reason, and how feeling uncomfortable (mild stress) can be quickly relieved by helping the body relax at the moment of stress reaction. Here is feedback from one of the participants, Virva Puumala (the author's style and grammar are preserved): "There came some new information during the lessons, for example that the link between emotions and body is so strong. And I learned also that no matter feeling you are having (unpleasant or pleasant) the symptoms in the body are always the same. I noticed this in the lessons and also during the homework. And the breathing exercise! Wow! That has really helped me a lot! Now I have tried to take the exercise as a good habit whenever I feel myself unpleasant." (Traditional Wing Chun Oulu, Finland, 2016.)

#### 4.1.1 Self-awareness exercises

The starting point of managing stress is to learn to "never give full attention to anything or anyone completely in order to save our ability to control ourselves" (Komarov, 2011). This method can be

also called “split attention,” when you are aware of your body as often as possible without stopping to do whatever it is you are doing. (Komarov, 2011).

If you intend to do any of the suggested exercises, it is necessary to make sure first you know how to calm yourself down and relax in case the stress reaction turns out stronger than anticipated. Thus, you must first read all the way through chapter four to also learn about suggested ways of handling stress in short-term. Second, you should try the suggested stress-relieving tips and make sure you understand how they work. If for some reason you cannot use the suggested ways to relax, make a list of your own ways to relax and test them in advance. Even though the following suggestions are mild, everyday life situations, do your best to avoid oversteering yourself. If you already are feeling overstressed, go straight to the stress-relieving section.

For any of the readers of this thesis, who are aware of their stress reaction, it is an easy task to create a situation where they can explore their stress reaction further. For those who are at the beginning of their self-awareness, I have personal suggestions, all of which I have gone through myself (sometimes unintentionally, as with the case of uncomfortable shoes) and can stand by my conclusions – with proper attention to our bodies, it is rather easy to notice and record the beginnings of stress reactions, however mild they may be. Hence, the list:

1. Pay attention to your body right now. See if there is any discomfort and do something to relieve it immediately. For example, if you are wearing a jacket and it is a bit hot, take it off. Alternatively, if you are feeling slight hunger, take care of it as soon as possible. Or, if you have been sitting for a while, get up and stretch. At least flex the feet, thigh or neck muscles to restore the blood circulation. Check your posture – maybe you have been hunching, and your body needs to open up the lungs for better breathing.
2. Return to your body any time you feel any discomfort, scan it for particular places of excess tension and do something to relieve it each time.
3. If you think you do not feel any stress reaction in your body, it is easy to create one for the purposes of experiment and learning. Below are situations you may have already experienced in your life; at your own responsibility and discretion you may decide to recreate any for the purpose of examining your body stress response:

- carry heavily loaded bags from a shop (avoid overload);
  - think of anything that makes you emotional and pay attention to your body as you do;
  - sit as long as you can with pressing your knees against each other (no cheating – literally as long as you can); alternative from yoga, if you know this one – chair pose;
  - go to bed later than usually and wake up much earlier. For a more extreme example, you can try to explore your body stress response if you ever happen not to sleep for a night;
  - skip a meal or two – only at an otherwise comfortable life situation, not before an important event or having other serious responsibilities, or if your health requires strict diet;
  - wear extremely uncomfortable shoes for a day or even better, for two or three – you will get a bright stress reaction increasing exponentially with each day. Moreover, you also have all chances to notice your stress from the anticipation of stress itself – any time you are not wearing them and know that you will soon have to, your body will be reacting. The shoe example is a tough experiment. Still, the method worked as usually, helping me to relieve the stress reaction enough to be able to perform my music. Naturally, consequent active relaxation was necessary in this case, just like with all the previous examples.
4. Invent your own way to go through a mild stress for the sake of an experiment. You may be able to learn rather quickly that it does not matter whether the stress is emotional or physical. Your body will be going through mostly the same sensations in each case.

Whichever option you choose, be reasonable. Without special training, it is possible to notice own stress only at mild levels, which are exclusively individual. Avoid extremes, as they are big loads on the body's systems. Make sure to experiment carefully. It is a good idea to have someone with you during that experiment in case the stress starts becoming too strong, and to prepare to calm yourself down with the means you know work for you a hundred percent – if necessary.

#### **4.1.2 Breathing as a stress-management tool**

The following advice can be found at a personal blog of Dr. Charles Sheridan, an experienced research psychologist with special interest in resilience: “Breathe. Controlling your breathing really



helps you in stressful situations. A time-honored technique, controlled breathing helps you manage stress reactions on the spot. This post introduces you to “tactical breathing” also called “combat breathing”. The tool helps firefighters race into burning buildings, police officers face armed resistance and soldiers fight in close combat. Definitely high-stress, high-risk situations. Breathe. Our day-to-day stress may be less dramatic, but it’s real, it’s ours, and the distress can be intense.” (2011.) The military tactical breathing he describes in his blog: counting to four while inhaling, then counting to four holding breath, counting to four while exhaling, counting to four while not breathing in – and repeating until the person starts feeling calmer. This special tactical breathing is what also military students are learning for “arousal control”, according to the National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces website (2016), and what the Navy SEALs, one of the most elite military units in the US, are using to fight combat anxiety. (Miller, 2012).

Interestingly, the particular method that is available online in these and other sources, is about controlled breathing and counting to four. The reality is such that the more complicated the method is, the more focus one needs to be able to apply it. However, the higher the heart rate, the lower the level of responsiveness, as described above in the stress-reaction description. Also, there may be situations in life where you cannot fit the 4-beat rhythm into certain activities, like performing a 3-beat music piece, which also happened to me during playing the Passepied 1 and 2, and in certain songs with the singer. Therefore, using an exercise where one has not only to control breathing but also count to four many times in a row, poses too much of a challenge for an overstressed individual to be able to apply it properly in a dramatically intense situation.

I have not been able to find a detailed description of the breathing controlling technique, which I am about to describe, in sources other than Tunik’s. I have used the examples above as a proof that similar breathing techniques are used by professionals coping with extreme situations. The following paragraph, thus, is dedicated to a more universal version of this tactical breathing.

“As soon as you feel stress – maybe, you are scared, or too tired, or in any other situation with high level of discomfort – you should breathe out and start breathing quickly and lightly, inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth. There is a large amount of nerve endings in the nose, they signalize to the brain that air is coming in properly and everything is under control. Exhaling through the mouth, you can get rid of the processed air quicker. Breathe with your chest, not with shoulders or stomach, and the bigger the tension you feel, the more often you must breathe. Make sure the amount of the air you are breathing in equals the amount you are breathing out. Otherwise,

if you inhale too little, you may experience dizziness and even faint, and when you breathe in too much, your psyche will get even more excited. You should continue breathing this way until you calm down, and then a few more minutes to secure your condition completely. If you feel like you are about to faint, choose a point slightly higher than the level of your eyes (to keep the head up), keep looking at it and breathe. As long as you focus your attention and breathe, you will remain conscious.” (2013.)

#### **4.1.3 Active relaxation as a stress-management tool**

The following paragraphs are also translated and adapted from Tunik’s interview. “Let’s define relaxation as a state of body where only the necessary muscles work. As a rule, we use too many muscles (and some end up underused) because we do not pay attention to our bodies in our everyday routines. We only start noticing how stressed we are when shoulders or other body parts start aching.

When the stress is mild and combined with the self-awareness described above, it creates a perfect surrounding for training your active relaxation. If you already know where your body gets the tensest when stressed, pay attention to that part first and give yourself a command to relax. Keep training the habit of returning to your body to scan for possible over-tensions and relaxing them. This way at first you will be learning to get rid of the unnecessary tension, and with time – to prevent it.

Physical training is an excellent way to lower the high muscle tone. Go for a jog until you get tired and run a little bit more still, to secure the relaxation – just like with the breathing exercise. If running is not for you, choose swimming, push-ups, sit-ups, sit-downs – any active physical activity has stress-relieving effects. Make sure you control your breathing, pay attention to when excessive tension is appearing in your body and get rid of it as soon as you notice it.” (2013.)

#### **4.1.4 Special exercises for relaxation**

This is another excerpt from the interview with Igor Tunik. His method is unique enough to not have analogies published online, at least not all in one place. So I choose to cite his findings in a complete version, all of which I have also tested myself:

1. “Sit all the way down and jump up, reaching with your hands up to the sky, then sit down and jump up again. Breathe in when jumping up, exhale when sitting down. Do it until you feel relaxed, and then a few more times.
2. Put your feet a bit wider than your shoulders. Counting to ten, start sitting down in a stable rhythm, very slowly. There should be no sudden movements. At count five, you should be midway to a complete sit-down. Hold your back straight (according to a correct sit-down technique) and breathe in with your nose, exhale with your mouth rhythmically and lightly. When you reach ten, you should be in a full sit-down. Then, counting to ten, start rising as slowly. In the extra difficult moments, make your breathing faster and continue. Repeat the cycle going down and back up as many times as needed to calm down.
3. Using the method in point two, you can do push-ups – counting to ten and breathing.
4. Sit down a hundred of times. Then a hundred more. If it doesn’t help, do one more hundred, and until you feel calm and relaxed. Make sure you do not hold up your breath at any point, or even better, use controlled breathing during the exercise.

After each of these special exercises you should walk around a bit and breathe in the way described earlier, it is forbidden to sit or lie down immediately. Give your psychophysics time to return to balance gradually.” (2013.)

## **4.2 Long-term stress-management**

While the short-term management techniques help relieve stress very quickly right during the stressful situation, creating a personal routine to minimize the risk of being overstressed is the other side of the coin. According to Grand Master of Traditional Wing Chun William Cheung, such routine stems from five aspects: correct eating, quality rest, exercises for toning the body, correct reaction to stress, and humorous attitude to life (2016). He suggests to learn living according to your biorhythms. For example, one way to start your day could be between 5 and 7 am. Physical exercises then are best done between 15 and 17 o’clock, and the best time to fall asleep, according to Cheung’s day routine example, is between 21 and 23 o’clock. (2016.)

According to Tunik, the psychophysical basis of stress-management starts with breathing, to get rid of unnecessary body tension, and then start adding the psychological part. “A person is least

stressed when actively doing something – when their attention is focused completely on what they want to achieve. While they are over-tensed, it is uncomfortable to act.” (Interview, 2016.)

My personal experience up-to-date made me learn: finding out optimal personal settings of sleeping, eating, work-out, main life activities (which is making music in my case) and, indeed, good sense of humour are the basis of keeping stress at bay, especially when I am the only one planning my daily schedules. I have learned it the hard way, when it took me a few months to realize I had been suffering from insomnia – it took over me so gradually I did not notice until life started feeling absolutely dull and hopeless. Because of high tension and low energy level, my exercise routine was interrupted, and was taking time and effort, one day at a time, to restore my stress-relieving and stress-preventive activities in order to return to normal daily life.

The few main points of my experience to underline:

- daily routine is more important than ever during the time of higher stress;
- daily routine means doing same activities at more or less same time;
- getting up at the same time is crucial, and also something that we can control, compared to falling asleep – regardless of how much sleep we got that night;
- learning to listen to your body and finding the food cycle that suits you the best requires special attention, research, time and effort;
- exercising routines are easier to maintain when there is a peer group, and training on one’s own is an ultimate test for self-discipline;
- extreme stress levels provide excellent self-exploring possibilities, as usually the deepest despair moments are the turning points in life;
- no matter how difficult it gets, there is always something we can do to improve our well-being;
- we are not alone, and there are people who experienced similar difficulties and are happy to share their advice.

## **5 RESULTS OF APPLIED STRESS-MANAGEMENT IN PIANO PERFORMANCE, COMPOSING, AND IMPROVISING**

I am keeping this section short intentionally. My specific musical results are highly likely to be different from anyone else's, because we are all different in our intentions and talents. Thus let the sheet music in the attachment and my YouTube uploads as Keys of Fate speak for themselves. I have to mention the main achievements briefly still, as they have to do with the psychophysiology of stress-management in the long term.

I take overcoming stage fright as the main example because it kept me overstressed for many years. I had left professional music for almost a decade. "There is considerable evidence that stage fright, like all other forms of anxiety, is multifaceted. In addition to partially independent somatic, cognitive, and behavioral manifestations, stage fright seems to comprise fear of fear, fear of social disapproval, problems with distraction, and a judgmental attitude." (Lehrer, 2015.) All these aspects may be of interest when one has time for deep self-reflection. However, I found myself coping with stress a lot better and faster when I had discovered clear instructions as to what I can do rather than just think. As a direct result of such approach, during the study years at OAMK, I took all possible opportunities to perform in many different ways, dared to offer my compositions at professional events, now for the second time I am including my own creations into a school exam, and on top of that, I started improvising – an activity I thought I was not capable of for all my life until this spring. Also, together with a friend, I have conducted stress-management workshops. Moreover, I have been sharing the method privately where appropriate. Those who use it have all confirmed it delivers the results exactly as indicated.

With classical piano performance following the school program as a main activity at the moment, it has been sweat and tears allocating time for composing and improvising. Interestingly, the latter two turned out a bigger stress-reliever for me than I anticipated. Trying new activities and surprising oneself with unexpected results is very refreshing, and I nowadays compose and improvise whenever I need to relieve my stress. Performing both music by other composers and my own energizes me more than just interpretative playing, and improvising freely is an exhilarating experience that leaves a feeling of dazzling accomplishment. I intend to continue exploring performance of own music and piano improvisation as a stress-relieving tool.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION INTERLACED

Psychophysiology of relaxation, which is synonymous to stress-management, can reach a lot deeper than discussed in this paper. It is puzzling why Oulu University of Applied Sciences does not include the subject in question into its compulsory studying programs. I think it would be great to ask give the students the following questions to think about when they apply to the school, and check their progress with answering them during study years – who they are and what they want to achieve in life. These are the questions to make people think, to give them a bigger perspective and to help them define themselves in order to take the most out of their education – and out of their talents. And even though, unfortunately, these questions have not been written into the curriculum, I found myself working very hard to answer them throughout these four-and-a-half years of studies as a music major. Such self-assessment requires hard work and basic understanding of how we function as complete human beings, but in the long run it is a stress-reliever of such magnitude, that I think it is only the matter of time for it to become a compulsory in-depth course.

Proper stress-management has a lot far-reaching benefits when it comes to answering these questions and realizing the answers into life. The first step is to learn to notice, control and manage own stress reactions – in other words, to become actively self-aware and to learn to control all possible about ourselves, leaving the uncontrollable to the subconscious. It takes time, knowledge, patience and willingness to make mistakes and learn to correct them. It takes experiments to realize what a minimal effort and maximum result is for us in each given situation. Step number two is to start taking care of life in general, and whether we like it or not, it boils down to two main questions: who I am and what I am living for? It's a highly individual process, with trials and errors, to recognize own genuine life priorities and deepest meaning. Difficult how it may be, it provides support of incomparable scale during the times of instability. It's like crafting a core for oneself that will keep one balanced and put-together when everything else is shattering and falling to pieces. Without knowing who they are and realizing their genuine life priorities, people very often become stressed and unhappy in occupations, which they find meaningless. Knowing yourself, your goals, your values and ideals can lead to the most amazing achievements. And when we are energetic, relaxed and joyful, our creations are bound to be at least benign – and at most, amazing works of genius in various spheres of life.

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# If Our Souls Could Speak

Tetyana Kushniruk  
(c) 2012

The image displays a musical score for a piano piece. It is written in 6/8 time and the key of D major. The score is organized into seven systems, each consisting of a treble and bass staff. The first system begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The piece features a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the bass and a more melodic line in the treble. Measure numbers 4, 7, 10, 13, 16, and 19 are indicated at the start of their respective systems. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and dynamic markings.

Tetyana Kushniruk

22

25

28

31

35

39

43

47

50

53

56

59

62

64



If Our Souls Could Speak (21. 02. 2014)

If our souls could speak, immortal, in no hurry  
What do you think they would discuss?  
The news of everyday, the future worries?  
What was the life like before us?

The plans for building business incubators,  
Who will get fired, who will stay,  
The existentialism in modern literature,  
Gay marriages, and dissertations of today?

Perhaps, they would, as I am no one to know this...  
I can only imagine that the ones  
Who never die, and who don't need to hurry,  
Have different use for time that's passing by.

They probably would ask themselves some questions  
Beyond the routine reach of mortal mind,  
For which the answers are so deeply hidden,  
That only the eternity can find.

I think they'd ask, "What do you see as beauty?  
What do you feel it means to share life?  
What is it to be honest, and be grateful,  
And last, not least, what does it mean to love?"

I think their answers, taking thousands years,  
Or maybe more, to find and comprehend,  
Would be something like this, in simple phrases,  
Easy to write, to read and understand.

That beauty is the harmony of being,  
Within yourself, with all around you.  
Sharing a life means every moment, spent  
With anyone, by thoughts or deeds you choose.

That being honest means you live by doing  
Only what you wholeheartedly believe in,  
And being grateful, you carefully nurture,  
And share the talents that you have been given.

And last, not least, what does it mean to love?  
Perhaps, it even for our souls, immortal,  
Takes ages finding out... or maybe it's just us,  
Unwilling to translate to life

What they have long since told us, many times?  
That what love is, we know, but, scared to die,  
We eagerly forget or redefine,  
And choose to carry on our existence  
In frenzy, reverie and hidden lie...

STERN DANCE

ANNEX 2

(c) March 2016

Stern Dance

Tetyana Kushniruk

Raw, rhythmical, tough. Move your body and head to the music, can do headbanging or any other suitable move to your feeling.  
May strike unwritten notes as long as they are close to the written ones. Adding more noise - good, leaving out the notes - frowned upon.  
Count the rhythm strictly or modify it a bit here and there if you feel like.

The first system of musical notation is for a piano accompaniment in 4/4 time. The right hand (treble clef) features a constant stream of chords, primarily triads and dyads, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The left hand (bass clef) is mostly silent, indicated by a long dash, with the instruction *constant forte* written below it.

The second system continues the piano accompaniment. The right hand maintains the rhythmic chordal pattern. The left hand begins to play in the second measure, featuring a sequence of chords in a descending bass line, with a key signature change to one flat (Bb).

The third system shows both hands playing more actively. The right hand continues with chords, and the left hand plays a rhythmic pattern of chords, maintaining the Bb key signature.

The fourth system continues the piece. The right hand has a few rests, while the left hand plays a steady sequence of chords. The key signature remains Bb.

The fifth system is the final one on the page. It features a more complex texture with both hands playing. The right hand has a melodic line with some grace notes. The left hand plays chords. A key signature change to two flats (Bbb) occurs in the final measure. The instruction *exactly these or somewhere nearby octaves or chords going up* is written above the left hand.

10

11

12

14

these or any other octaves or chords somewhere around the indicated octaves

18

*mp*

22

*constant forte*

25

Musical score for measures 25-26. The right hand plays a continuous eighth-note chordal pattern in G major. The left hand is silent in measure 25 and enters in measure 26 with a similar eighth-note chordal pattern.

27

Musical score for measures 27-28. Both hands continue with eighth-note chordal patterns in G major.

28

Musical score for measures 28-31. Measures 28-30 feature glissando markings on both hands. Measure 31 is marked *mp* and shows a change in the right hand's texture.

32

Musical score for measures 32-35. The right hand plays chords in 3/8 time, and the left hand plays eighth notes in 3/8 time. Measures 33-35 show a change to 7/16 time signature. The right hand is marked *mf cresc.*

36

Musical score for measures 36-38. Measures 36-37 are in 7/16 time with a *rit.* marking. Measure 38 is in 4/4 time and features a final chord in the right hand.

# The Laughing Dance

Tetyana Kushniruk  
March 2016

voice or violin

3

3

3

3

*gliss.*

Swing, about  $\text{♩} = 85$

*no pedal*

3

3

3

*gliss.*

3

5

*gliss.*

3

7

*gliss.*

(c) Tetyana Kushniruk



9

12

14

16

# Variations on a theme by Depeche Mode "Personal Jesus"

2013-2016

By Tetyana Kushniruk

(1988)

Insolently, roughly, without much dynamic taste

Shyly  
*p*

*f*

*mp*

27

*f*

31

*mp*

35

39

43

47

*Var. 1. Begging*

*p legato*

52

55

55

58

1. 2.

58

61

61

65

65

69

69

73

73

77

Var. 2. Unclarity. Blurry. Faster than before

77

81

Musical score for measures 81-84. Treble clef has a continuous eighth-note melody. Bass clef has a simple accompaniment of quarter notes and chords.

85 *Resolutely*

Musical score for measures 85-88. Treble clef continues with eighth notes. Bass clef has a more active accompaniment with eighth notes and chords. A dynamic marking of *f* (*subito*) is present.

89 *Blurry*

Musical score for measures 89-92. Treble clef has eighth notes. Bass clef has triplets of eighth notes. Dynamic markings of *pp* and *mp* are used.

93

Musical score for measures 93-95. Treble clef has eighth notes. Bass clef has triplets of eighth notes. A dynamic marking of *p* is present.

*Var. 3. Clear night sky*

96

Musical score for measures 96-101. Treble clef has eighth notes. Bass clef has triplets of eighth notes and chords. A dynamic marking of *pp* is present.

102 *heavy thoughts*

Musical score for measures 102-108. Treble clef has chords. Bass clef has chords and a melodic line. A dynamic marking of *sotto voce* is present.

109

Musical score for measures 109-114. Treble clef has chords. Bass clef has chords and a melodic line.

115

Musical score for measures 115-120. The treble staff features chords with some melodic movement, while the bass staff has a more active line with eighth notes and chords.

121

Musical score for measures 121-127. The treble staff has dense chordal textures, and the bass staff continues with a rhythmic accompaniment.

128

*Var. 4. Huge city commotion. Loneliness*

Musical score for measures 128-133. The treble staff has a melodic line with some grace notes. The bass staff has a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The tempo/mood marking *p fast, legato* is present.

134

Musical score for measures 134-136. The treble staff has a melodic line with grace notes. The bass staff has a steady eighth-note accompaniment.

137

Musical score for measures 137-139. The treble staff has a melodic line with grace notes. The bass staff has a steady eighth-note accompaniment.

140

*irritation*

Musical score for measures 140-141. The treble staff has a melodic line with grace notes. The bass staff has a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The tempo/mood marking *irritation* is present.

142

Musical score for measures 142-143. The treble staff has a melodic line with grace notes. The bass staff has a steady eighth-note accompaniment.

144 <sup>s</sup>

146 <sup>s</sup>

148 <sup>s</sup>

150 <sup>s</sup> lots of irritation

152 <sup>s</sup>

*Var. 5. Anger*  
**f**

154 <sup>f</sup>

156

159

162

*argument, heavily*

*secco ad lib.*

165

168

*slower, fake forgiveness*

*mp*

171

*a tempo*

*mf*

*f*

174

*dim.*

*pp*

*f*

*Care no more*

*Var. 6*

177

*mp*



180

Musical score for measures 180-181. The piece is in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. The right hand features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, while the left hand provides a rhythmic accompaniment with chords and single notes.

182

182 *hidden agendas*

Musical score for measures 182-184. The right hand continues with a melodic line, and the left hand features a more active accompaniment with sixteenth-note patterns. The annotation "hidden agendas" is placed above the right hand in measure 183.

185

185 *ff* *sotto voce*

Musical score for measures 185-187. The right hand has a melodic line with some rests. The left hand has a rhythmic accompaniment. The annotation "ff" is placed above the right hand in measure 186, and "sotto voce" is placed above the right hand in measure 187.

188

188 *ff*

Musical score for measures 188-190. The right hand has a melodic line with some rests. The left hand has a rhythmic accompaniment. The annotation "ff" is placed above the right hand in measure 189.

191

191 *mp* *ff*

Musical score for measures 191-192. The right hand has a melodic line with some rests. The left hand has a rhythmic accompaniment. The annotation "mp" is placed above the right hand in measure 191, and "ff" is placed above the right hand in measure 192.

193

193 *mf* *ff* *rit.*

Musical score for measures 193-194. The right hand has a melodic line with some rests. The left hand has a rhythmic accompaniment. The annotation "mf" is placed above the right hand in measure 193, "ff" is placed above the right hand in measure 194, and "rit." is placed above the right hand in measure 194.

195 *Var. 7. Acceptance. Clarity. New dreams*

195 *mp* *whole variation*

Musical score for measures 195-200. The right hand has a melodic line with some rests. The left hand has a rhythmic accompaniment. The annotation "mp" is placed above the right hand in measure 195, and "whole variation" is placed above the right hand in measure 195. The piece ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

202

*Var. 8. Doubtlessly ahead*

206

*sempre cresc., variation full of pedal*  
**p**

210

213

*fading away*

216

*repeat until faded away and wait till pedalled sound stops*  
**mp**

219

**mp**

221

**f**

223

225

230

237

246

252

260